

Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 2:1-4 John 20:19-23

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Acts 2:1-4

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

John 20:19-23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Since the beginnings of time, sages, mystics, priests, scholars, and theologians have pondered the being and the nature of God. Long before the days of Abraham and Sarah, human societies all over the world sought to make sense of life and the world around them within the context of that which was bigger – that which was beyond – that which transcended the world seen and the world unseen.

Simpler in many ways were the days when societies and communities all basically shared a common world view and a common understanding of that which was

sacred – the world of the Spirit – the realm of God. A community in isolation had the luxury of passing on from generation to generation their experience and understandings of God in ways that made sense in relation to the world around them. But even since the beginnings of the human experience, humanity has been restless. For any number of reasons, humanity has been on the move. Famine, war, trade, over-population, disease, weather, or whatever – people have been on the move. Cultures and languages have come in contact with each other. With the cultural and linguistic contacts came the sharing of understandings about God.

God the Personal. God the Unknowable. God the Eternal Present. The infinite aspects and attributes of God personified in individual deities, giving rise to endless myths passed down from generation to generation. Pantheons of gods and goddesses, spirits good, evil, and benign. It would be quite natural to understand God within a whole host of deities. God being so beyond the ability for humanity to explain and understand – too big for anyone to fully grasp – too much for any one being to encapsulate. So, a deity for every experience – love, agriculture, creation, all animal life, fertility, storms, the seas and oceans, the land, the trees, the rivers, and so on. For most, God was too big to fathom in God's completeness; too mysterious for explanation; too present everywhere to comprehend within the context of the present and the particular.

But, little by little, God chose to become known. All at once was too much, too quickly. But, little by little. Within the context of humanity's ability to understand. So, Abraham and Sarah. Wanderers. Born in Ur in what is now southern Iraq. Certainly influenced by the Sumerian culture, but yet their own. Traveling from what is now

southern Iraq to what is now southern Turkey, through what is now Israel, down into Egypt, and then back into what is now Israel. Moving. Having contact with lots of different peoples along the way. But, somehow they were beginning to understand God. A connection had been made – a connection which would continue for generations. Little by little, God would come to be known.

But, who was this God? Certainly the Creator of all that is: the Almighty God. But there was more. In the opening words of the Creation we read of the Breath of God – Ruah. Like a mist over the waters – like a gentle breeze – like a breath. God breathed. Humanity came into being.

But humanity had culture. Humanity had language. Humanity had to use culture and language to put into words that which was beyond words – to put into concepts that which is beyond explanation. Poetry and story and allegory and parable – word pictures to bring to our understanding the God who is beyond understanding.

And now it is our turn. We are inheritors of thousands of years of traditions, story, scriptures, parables, oral traditions, experiences, faithfulnesses and unfaithfulnesses. Thousands of years of experiencing God within all sorts of cultures and expressed through numerous languages. And we receive it all and make sense of it all within the context of our culture and our part of the world and in our economy and amidst our ecology and express it within the limitations of our language. Only the arrogant and the ignorant can possibly think that they have God all figured out. Only the out of touch can think that he or she can completely understand the will of God. Anyone with any amount of wisdom knows that the more certain a person is about who God is,

the more that person probably is really out of touch and out of step with God. And so, the Mystery. And so the Presence.

We have all heard of God referred to as Mother. Or maybe we have heard of God referred to as Mother/Father God. Seems awkward for those of us raised within the language and culture we were raised in. But every theologian will bend over backwards to tell us that God is neither male or female. God is not an “it” either. God is. God simply is. And humanity, male and female were created in the image of God. In Christ, we are not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. We know that. We know that.

But since the understanding of God is passed on to us through the vehicle of language and culture, just some thoughts: In the Old Testament Hebrew, the word for God’s Spirit, Ruah, is feminine. In the Aramaic, the language which Jesus and the disciples spoke, the word for Spirit was feminine. The New Testament was written in Greek. The Greek word for Spirit is neither feminine or masculine. It is in the neuter. Then the word for Spirit was translated into Latin. The word for Spirit in Latin is in the masculine. Over that six hundred years from when the Hebrew Old Testament was completed until the whole Bible was translated into Latin, the word used to express the Spirit of God shifted from feminine to neuter to masculine. There were some theological reasons for it as well. An early Christian heresy known as Gnosticism began putting a lot of emphasis on a second term used for the Spirit of God – essentially the word for Wisdom. Wisdom in Hebrew was also in the feminine. The Gnostics began to personify the concept of Wisdom, or Sophia, into a goddess along with God the Father.

The early Church, in reaction to the Gnostics creating a goddess worship, took steps away from the feminine nature of God's Spirit.

Is God female? That would be too limiting. Is God male? That, too, would be too limiting. But for us, in our search for understanding – in our search for knowing God – we have to be aware that God is far beyond the limitations that we will put on God through language, culture, or tradition.

So, with all the vast amount of knowledge, traditions, faith expressions, doctrines, theologies, dogmas, and interpretations, how is it possible to know God, even remotely? The answer we celebrate today. The Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit. A gift from God to touch our souls, nudge our consciences, beckon to our beings. Without having to have all knowledge, we can know. Without great strength, we can have power. Even amidst confusion, we can have faith. That is the Spirit of God. That is the Holy Spirit. That is God within us. That is God's gift to us.

May the Spirit of God be with us all. May the Pneuma of God be with us all. May the Ruah of God be with us all. Amen.