

Reflections on "Spirit"

Luke 5:1-11, July 9, 2006

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The first time I heard your song, Jim, was in 1989 when I came to Claremont School of Theology for a "prospective student" day. After the day's events encouraging us to enter seminary, there was a dinner on the grounds. Professor John Cobb spoke briefly, and then we were led in the singing of "spirit." So it was not only the first time I heard "Spirit" but also the first time I heard John Cobb speak on Process Theology. Process Theology is a way of understanding God and how God is in the world. Given its name, it should not be a surprise that Process Theology views God's work in the world as a work in process--thank God! It does not take for granted that God created the world and then rested not only on the 7th day but ever after, watching us stumble around down here making fools of ourselves! We believe that creation is ongoing and that one reason God created us was so that we could be part of the ongoing work as co-creators with God.

Jim told me that he wrote this song after a sabbatical at Claremont School of Theology when he, too, heard and studied with John Cobb. So Jim and I both resonate with Process Theology. But there are some other major themes that are important to Process Theology. First, if God is still in process in our world, how does that happen? This song answers that question. It is through an infusion of God's "Spirit" that moves mysteriously, obviously, empoweringly, unexpectedly, gently, and lovingly. It is through God's "Spirit" moving through all of creation, land, water, history, and people. It is through God's calling us to a future.

Let's look specifically at the verses of this song and see how "Spirit" influences the world. Notice I used the word "influence." Process Theology understands God as One who invites, lures, encourages, nurtures, guides; the God of Process Theology doesn't rely on threats to make God's will happen in creation. So in verse 1 we hear about God's creation. *You moved through the waters...* Tom tells me that the Hebrew verb for *moved* is rarely used in the Hebrew Bible, in fact it is used only a couple of other places where it refers to a mother eagle hovering over her nest. In Genesis it is as though God is hovering over the embryo of creation, nurturing it into breath and being. *You called to the deep...* Calling is a big deal in process understanding. We're into conversation, talking it through, encouraging one another to come into our best lives. God doesn't create the perfect storm; God calls to the deep to participate in its own way in the work of creation.

Then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep... This word “coaxed,” which I have trouble saying, is a fitting word for God’s style of creation. Those of us who believe God works in and through evolution believe this is still happening. When we vacationed in Hawaii, Tom talked about the way the islands were formed and are still forming through the lava bubbling up from the center of the earth. There will be another Hawaiian island on the south and east of the Big Island; it’s even now forming under the water; it’s being coaxed up by the “Spirit.”

And over the eons you called to each thing, ‘Awake from your slumbers and rise on your wings.’ God’s creative spirit needs us to get on with it. Often the first words out of the mouth of angels in the Bible are these: *Arise! Awake!* It’s a call to abandon our complacency, perhaps a little bit of laziness, and join the work of the Creator! Shall we sing verse one? *You moved on the waters, you called to the deep, then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep; And over the eons you called to each thing, ‘Awake from your slumbers and rise on your wings.’*

You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand... This verse reminds me of the great Exodus. It was one thing to free the Israelites from slavery; it was another for them to learn how to be the people of God. It was in the desert with some required measure of discipline from God so that the Israelites were formed into a people of faith. *And you goaded your people with a law and a land...* The word “goaded” refers to being prod, poked, the dictionary says “to give impetus and insight”. God goaded the Israelites to become who they were called to be through the law given at Mt. Sinai and through the promise of land on which to live and build their lives after years of slavery in Egypt. But as they became more self-assured rather than resting in God’s blessed assurance, they compromised their true selves for the idols and lies all around them. Then they were “confounded”, i.e. bewildered, confused when life was meaningless and God wasn’t happy. They had forsaken their primary relationship with their Creator for the power of kings and the glory of the temple.

Fortunately, God did not leave them to their own course forever, but *then you spoke through your prophets to open their eyes.* Unfortunately, the people were not very good listeners. They rarely heard what the prophets said. They listened to the ones who told them what they wanted to hear. Is there a lesson for us here? Let’s sing verse two. *You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand, and you goaded your people with a law and a land; when they were confounded by their idols and lies, then you spoke through your prophets to open their eyes.*

Then God tried another approach. *You sang in a stable, you cried from a hill...* God’s great

incarnation in Jesus Christ. Our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says this: In Jesus the man of Nazareth, God has come to us sharing our common lot. This is what we celebrate every Christmas; God's being embedded in creation so that we could see and learn the heart of God. And it came to be in the most unexpected of ways--through a baby and then through a man who used the power of a cross rather than the power of the sword. *Then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still...*I wasn't sure what you had in mind here, Jim, and I'm giving you the last word, so perhaps you can explain it. But to me it sounds like the resurrection power of Christ in a world that was "still" after the crucifixion because it was void of hope. "Whispered" would be a process God would do. God wouldn't rain down war on those who crucified God's beloved; God would whisper with such power that the world might venture to hope for a new future.

And down in the city you called once again, when you blew through your people on the rush of the wind. It's encouraging that Pentecost happened in a city. Today's cities are places of intense activity and a multiplicity of problems. The schools don't always work, there's violence in the streets, there's people sleeping on the streets, there's neglected children, there's a lack of public services, but God chose to make God's presence known in a profound way on the day of Pentecost in a crowded multiethnic, multiracial, multi-linguaged city. God did not choose a quiet mountain resort or an empty beach. God chose a city! Let's sing verse three: *You sang in a stable, you cried from a hill, then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still; And down in the city you called once again, when you blew through your people on the rush of the wind.*

Our religious ancestors we read about in the Bible were very "past oriented." Whenever things were bad, they recalled a glorious past when God blessed them abundantly. They were not even very "present oriented." Why enjoy the present when they were run over and occupied with one foreign nation after another. They held tight to the traditions of the past because the past was much better than the present and much more certain than anything they could envision in their future. So God introduces a radical idea: *You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes.* Number one: there is a tomorrow. Number two: you're part of that tomorrow. Number three: God is going to break down the barriers, the walls, the ancient schemes, the systems of domination (both within and without) that keep us from entering the future. Something is coming down, God's future is coming down, and you're part of it. It's a major reorientation from dwelling in the past to living with hope in God's future.

*From the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams...*The incarnation, in-creation, of God in Christ has the power to set us free. Jesus' sermon in the gospel of Luke quotes Isaiah 61:

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me...he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The prophet Joel is referenced in the final words of our hymn: *Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes, with bold new decisions your people arise.* I know that some folks (and Jim knows this, too.) have been offended by “women seeing visions, and men having clear eyes,” but I always took it as a compliment: women being able to see what was hidden, what was possible; and men, present company excluded, (often the power brokers of society) living in a haze and not able to see clearly. So there you go! The point is that men and women together rise up with boldness and courage and with new decisions; decisions that don’t depend solely on the past, but decisions that bring novelty to play in this creation which God loves and in which God is still present through “spirit.” Let’s sing verse four: *You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams; Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes. With bold new decisions your people arise.* And now with the final word, here’s Jim....