

Genesis 1:1-2 (NLT)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.[a] 2 The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

Reflection: Beginnings of the PCC - Rev. Heather Carlson

In the beginning...the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

The Holy Spirit dances over the formlessness and darkness bringing forth light and life.

The power of God has been at work since before even time began, and the same spirit that brought forth the land and sea, vegetation and animals, brings forth the body of Christ, the church.

The church's beginnings are as ancient as the declaration in Genesis that for humans "it is not good...to be alone." God creates community among people as a reflection of the community inherent in God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Bound in love and purpose.

In the ministry of Jesus, he calls disciples to himself AND to one another. As Jesus ascends to heaven, he promises the Holy Spirit will continue to shape, guide, and empower the people of God, his church.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada traces our roots to the Reformation of the church in the 1500's. John Calvin, originally a Roman Catholic and trained as a humanist lawyer, was led by the Holy Spirit to participate in re-forming the church that had become captive to power and wealth. In 1530 he broke with the established church to join the movement of reformers who sought to emphasize:

Scripture - as the basis for truth, faith and life

Faith - as the route to salvation

Grace - as the gift of God

Christ - as the only intermediary

And all of this, not for their own glory, but that God alone would be glorified.

This movement reaches the shores of Scotland in the late 1500's through a student of Calvin's, John Knox, and first reaches the shores of Canada in the early 1630's when a French Calvinist church takes shape in old Quebec city.

In Scotland, the Presbyterian movement challenges the hierarchy and authority of the established church that puts power in the hands of individuals; priests, bishops, cardinals and popes. Instead the reformed church calls on Presbyters, a Greek word also meaning elders, to seek the guidance of God together. And a series of church courts are established - elected elders serve locally in sessions, regionally in Presbyteries and Synods, and nationally in General Assemblies.

As immigration to British North America begins in the 1700's, settlers bring various branches of Presbyterian governance and worship to the new colonies - importing many of the arguments and divisions of the now established Church of Scotland. The Holy Spirit moves again and four such streams in 1875 choose to form one church as the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Celebrating 150 years of the reformed and **reforming** church. Part of our heritage and work of the Holy Spirit in our midst is that anytime the church becomes captive to power and wealth or strays from the faithfulness to which the Spirit of God calls us, we must be reformed. For the Spirit of God is still working in formlessness and darkness to bring forth light and life.

Romans 8:14-16 (NRSVUE)

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. **15** For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba![] Father!" **16** it is that very Spirit bearing witness[m] with our spirit that we are children of God,*

Reflection: Led by the Spirit of God: Dr. Robert Taylor, minister of St. John's Church, Medicine Hat: 1943-1967 - Bill Cocks

Romans 8:14-16 Strong words, from Paul. Words full of glorious good news. "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery...but you have received a spirit of adoption." ADOPTION not SLAVERY. We are ALL God's children, heirs to His kingdom, full partners in His work in the world. And when we cry out: "Father!" it is God's own Spirit that bears witness to this TRUTH from within us. Hallelujah!

And the Spirit was in Robert Taylor, who was the minister of St. John's from 1943 to 1967 and he certainly was a child of God, and he knew it and the Spirit moved in and through him during a very influential time. It was a time of post-war prosperity. Baby boomers were arriving and growth was rapacious. This congregation grew and grew and grew. We were part of the times but this congregation was also led by a man of the Spirit and he led this church to grow and build. The gymnasium (later named Taylor Hall) and education wing were built in 1954, no small undertaking. He also led the congregation to redesign this sanctuary. When my parents were married here in 1950, the design was original with the choir front and centre, organ with pipes showing behind, communion table (small and unremarkable) in front. This new design was professional and inspired by the holy purposes of this special place. Note the communion table, the centre of attention; the pulpit, with the burning bush (symbol of our denomination) and the lectern, with the Dove (symbol of the Holy Spirit – should be descending not ascending but...) Scott Raible, in the regular religious column, By the Way, offered by the News to ministers in Medicine Hat, spoke of "sacred ground in the heart of the City". He referenced St. John's, Fifth Avenue Memorial, St. Barnabas and St. Patrick's. I urge you to read the article because it is too long for me to do so here and now. Among many other interesting things he says of these churches: "In a world that often feels fragmented and fast, these churches offer something deeply grounding, a space to encounter the holy, to remember who we are, and to be reoriented toward the love and peace that is only found in Christ Jesus. They are, quite literally, sacred ground." I have always found that spiritual presence in this place and I believe firmly

that it was the Spirit of God at work in Bob Taylor, the Session and the members of St. John's that created this special place. I'm not sure I would be a professing Christian today if I had not grown up surrounded by the Spirit of God I find here, not just in the architecture but in the people inspired by it.

The Spirit of God worked through Robert Taylor in other ways too. His children's stories left a big impression on me. Bob was a bird watcher and he had a wonderful collection of Audubon pictures, large pictures of birds, which he used to inspire his children's stories. He would sit at the front with the Sunday school kids gathered around him, a big picture on his knee and a good story to tell.

He was a humble man, not unaware of who he was or his calling, but ordinary and simple in his customs. When he was made the moderator of the PCC and received his honorary Doctor of Theology, he modeled his new gown with the doctor's stripes on the sleeves and the lace jabot and cuffs, indicative of his election as moderator. He said it seemed a little too much but he went along with it because it was expected. He was moved by the Spirit, a child of God, adopted not enslaved, calling out with the other children of God: "Abba, Father." And they heard him and we bless him and them for the gifts of the Spirit which they have left us.

Acts 2:1-4 (NRSVUE)

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

Reflection: Holy Spirit aflame - Rev. Heather Carlson

"What looked like flames...settled on each of them and everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit." We have two windows with flames in our sanctuary. Let's find them.

Lamp - light

Fire, particularly in a pre-electrical age represents being able to see, even in the darkness. The stained glass window depicts a lamp on the Bible evoking the text from Psalm 119 - Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

In a world that asks us to follow any number of authorities - political, influencers, almighty dollar. The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that scripture is given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. (1.2) And the Holy Spirit is necessary for interpretation so that "the inward work of the Holy Spirit bear[s] witness by and with the word in our hearts...." so we "may worship Him in an acceptable manner and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope." 1.6, 8

In the New Testament Jesus is referred to as the light of the world. The one who shines in the darkness. Bringing truth, hope, and healing to places where darkness has held sway. And Jesus says that his followers are called to be light in the world as well. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...."

To be illuminated through Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the One who is the light of the world is a holy calling worth our lives and the life of the church into the next 150 years.

Bush

Normally we would expect that a burning bush would be consumed by the fire. Fire converts fuel to heat - very useful for cooking or heating a home. But something extraordinary takes place in Exodus 3 when Moses encounters a bush that although it is aflame, is not burning. The burning bush, as the emblem of the PCC encourages us to see the church as sustained by divine presence, strengthened to endure, and called into mission.

God is in this place: Divine Presence

"And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed."

This is the moment when God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The burning bush represents God's presence — powerful and purifying — yet miraculously not destructive. Moses is on holy ground. And God speaks. Very similar to the disciples that gather at Pentecost. They are on holy ground. And God speaks.

It is a foundational understanding of our church that God is present with us. Even when we encounter God's presence in unexpected places and ways.

Strengthened to Endure

The phrase "nec tamen consumebatur" is a Latin phrase that translates to "it was not however consumed" or "yet it was not consumed". (It is the motto of the Church of Scotland.) It speaks of the church's enduring presence by the power of God that burns in it, but does not consume it.

Endurance - We can learn a lot from those who have gone before us. Not to return to the solutions of the past, but allow the steadfast faithfulness of God through ALL circumstances to carry us forward into bold and faithful discipleship in our generation and beyond.

Growing up in UCC - Indestructibility: sovereignty of God - God will get what God wants. God wants a church, so despite persecution, loss of status, attack, suppression, martyrdom and opposition, the church will endure. The report at General Assembly on "Narratives of Hope and Possibility" looking ahead to the future of the PCC as a denomination, there is no doubt that God's church will endure, what part will the PCC be in it?

God strengthens the church through refining fire. Just as silver and gold are purified so too, believers and the church are strengthened as the dross (waste and impurities) is consumed. In the Acts passage, the fire of the Holy Spirit consumes their fear so that they are able to preach.

What will we be called to let go of as we move into the future? As a reformed and reforming church, we ought to anticipate that God will continue to refine traditions that have gone stale or practices that cloud our vision of what God is up to in our midst today.

Calling/Mission

We have a calling and mission. Not just to exist, but to follow the Spirit to the work that God has for us. Moses was called to liberate the Hebrew people. The disciples were called to preach the Word and form a community of believers. From the burning bush - the enduring, purifying presence of God in God's church calls us still.

I believe St. John's has the opportunity and calling to be faithful in this generation and beyond. There are people in your life and mine who are disconnected from God and from one another. That the church is a light of the Kingdom of God - a different way to live in the world. That the power of the Holy Spirit descends still upon us. Thanks be to God. Amen.