

OPENING PRAYER

God of heaven and earth, before the foundation of the universe and the beginning of time you are the triune God: Author of creation, eternal Word of salvation, life-giving Spirit of wisdom. Guide us to all truth by your Spirit, that we may proclaim all that Christ has revealed and rejoice in the glory he shares with us. Glory and praise to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen. (Prayer for Holy Trinity Sunday, *ELW*, p. 37)

FOCUS VERSE

(John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 12:7)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

The gift of the Spirit: A divine wild goose chase

Session one

Spirit of God, revealer and resource

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

When many of us think of the Holy Spirit, the first thing that comes to mind is a dove. Doves symbolize a peaceful purity that feels appropriate for God's presence and power. Images of doves are sewn into red Pentecost banners, depicted in stained-glass windows and worn on necklaces. Although a dove may have descended on Jesus at his baptism, I like to think that a different bird can also help us understand the Holy Spirit: a goose.

My spiritual kinship with geese started years ago, when I worked as a summer counselor at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp, an ELCA outdoor ministry. That summer our staff listened regularly to a folk music duo, Chris and Johnny, who later became known as Storyhill. One of their songs, "Steady On," had a chorus that began: "Steady on like the honkers, fly through the air..." This song about geese flying with persistence, courage and community, in chevron formation, became our summer anthem. In fact, one group of second and third grade campers became "The Holy Honkers." The kids moved through camp in V-formation, chanting: "For Jesus Christ, we go bonkers! That's why we're the Holy Honkers!" Then they'd honk and flap their arms like wings. This brought us an inordinate amount of joy.

We didn't know at the time, but we were introducing our young campers to an ancient image of the Holy Spirit: not a dove or wind or fire, but a goose. In Celtic spirituality—a spirituality shaped by believers in fifth- and sixth-century Ireland and Scotland—the Holy Spirit came to be symbolized by a wild goose, “an geadh-glas.” A wild goose is not a quiet, demure creature. A wild goose is untamed and uncontrollable. It is loud and fierce, perfectly free, ready to snap at anyone who tries to capture it.

Like a wild goose, the Holy Spirit is hard to capture, difficult to nail down with an easy definition or quick answers. One can't domesticate the Holy Spirit. There is freedom, surprise and an unexpectedness to this Holy Wild Goose. As congregations sometimes say during worship, the Holy Spirit is “the power of God at work inside us.” God's Spirit is not safe, tame or predictable. But God's Spirit is good and never stops bringing life to this world.

So this study will be a sort of wild goose chase. We will spend these next sessions tracking the Spirit through Scripture and seeing where this Spirit might be leading us in our lives. During this first session, the study will examine who the Spirit is and to whom the Spirit is given. Next month, for session two, we'll follow the tracks of the Spirit who is the Breath of God, to see how God's Spirit is giving us life. Finally, our third session will explore the Spirit as the Wind of God that moves and guides us.

BUT FIRST, THE TRINITY...

Before we can talk about the Holy Spirit, we need to talk about the Trinity. An early church father once said that to deny the Trinity is to endanger your salvation, but to attempt to understand the Trinity is to endanger your sanity. While the Holy Trinity is a way of understanding God, it can be a confounding thing to get our heads around. The Holy Trinity gives us a framework for making sense of how our one God is made known to us in many ways.

When we say the Creed together in worship, we

acknowledge that God is the creator of the whole world, an all-knowing, sovereign. We declare that God became human in Jesus, who is all divine and God in human flesh. And we profess that God's Spirit is still active and known in the world today. God is enormous and cosmic...incarnate and human... real, intimate and empowering. All one God, all with the same character, influence and reality, yet known in all sorts of ways. One God—three persons.

■ **Read:** Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1-4

Share aloud or reflect:

1. As you read the beginning of these two creation stories, who was there? What does this tell us about the Trinity?

John the Evangelist starts his story of Jesus not with Mary or the shepherds, but with the creation of the universe. He boldly names Jesus as God incarnate, one who was present with God at the creation of the world. In Genesis 1, we see that the Spirit was also there at creation, hovering over the waters. From the very beginning, God—Creator, Word and Spirit—has been working to create, love and save the world.

The three persons of the Trinity uniquely express God's work and way in this world, helping us make sense of the multiplicity of God's actions. The Spirit is always bound in connection to God the Creator and linked to what we know of God in Jesus. Now let's look at what Jesus reveals to us about the Spirit—and how the Spirit keeps revealing Jesus to us.

THE REVELATORY SPIRIT: JESUS WITH US

📖 **Read:** John 14:15-19, 25-31

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What does Jesus say about who the Spirit is? What does Jesus say the Spirit will do?

Jesus speaks these words to his friends on the night before he dies. This is a farewell address, a last lecture, in which he shares as much knowledge, comfort and faith with his disciples as he can. Preparing them for his departure, Jesus says: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (v. 18). Later he says: “I am going away, and I am coming to you” (v. 28). Though seemingly impossible, this statement is accurate, since with the Spirit, Jesus can come and go at the same time. Through the Spirit, Jesus remains with them, and with us, after his resurrection.

While the Holy Spirit can often resemble a wild goose that refuses to be captured in a cage of easy answers, it is not a totally free-flowing, mystical entity. Inseparable from Jesus, the Spirit continues Jesus’ ministry. The Spirit persists with God’s saving, loving work—a work that began with creation, became embodied in Jesus and works in and through all of us. As we track the wild goose of the Spirit, our knowledge of Jesus works as a sort of guardrail for us, keeping us on the right road.

Jesus tells his friends that the Spirit will keep teaching them, reminding them who Jesus is. The blessing of this gift of the Spirit remains for us two thousand years after Jesus lived, died, rose and ascended. It is through the Holy Spirit that we come to know Jesus.

How does the Spirit continue to reveal Jesus to us, teaching us to trust in Jesus? Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism (in his explanation

of the Creed’s third article): “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth...” In other words, we cannot know Jesus or trust him on our own. But the Spirit is a revealer, showing us who Jesus is, enlightening us, making us holy, keeping us in the faith.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Can you see the Spirit as a revealer in your life? Can you share an experience of revelation that you had—one that showed you something about who Jesus is? Or perhaps one that moved you to trust Jesus when you felt doubtful or afraid? What happened?

GOOD COMPANY ON THE WAY

You may not know it, but you can find a few verses about sports in the Bible. There’s a tennis match in Genesis, when Joseph served on Pharaoh’s court. (See what I did there?) And in John 14, there must be a soccer match since Jesus gives his disciples a “pair-of-cleat(s).” Well, okay, it’s not really about soccer, but Jesus does give his friends some coaching about the Holy Spirit, the *Paraclete*.

“Paraclete” is the English form of the Greek word for the Holy Spirit. Some English versions of the New Testament continue to use this word, while others use translations such as Advocate or Helper or Comforter (vv. 16 and 26). As is often the case with the work of translating, these words are good, but incomplete. In biblical Greek, *parakletos* literally means “called alongside”—from *para* (alongside) and *kaleo* (to call or summon). The Spirit, the Paraclete, is one who accompanies us, our

Comforter and Consoler.

When my son was 18 months old, he was adorably adventurous. He would walk around exploring endlessly. While a delight to watch, he was also a constant danger to himself and others. He needed someone to walk alongside him, to keep him from toddling into the street or demolishing his sister's carefully built Duplo Lego village. Similarly, my friends were constant companions for me after my dad died, offering me tissues, sitting quietly with me as I wept. My carefully built life felt demolished by cancer. My friends walked with me, keeping me from wandering distractedly into traffic or despair.

The Spirit, our Paraclete, is in many ways a loving parent and a caring friend who walks alongside us, accompanying us as closely as our own shadow. The Spirit can move in surprising ways to provide consolation and company, a reminder of the divine role described in Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (v. 4, ESV).

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Think of a time when you felt the Spirit's presence accompanying you. Share aloud or write down three words to describe how it felt to know you were not alone.
5. Who/what people has the Spirit worked through to "paraclete" (accompany) you? How can you, in turn, accompany others, in the Spirit?

TAKING THE WITNESS STAND

📖 **Read:** John 15:26–16:15

Share aloud or reflect:

6. What more do you hear in this passage about who the Spirit is? What will the Spirit do for Jesus' friends?

In Jesus' time, people used the word *parakletos* as a legal term for a court advocate. For this reason, many Bible translations use the word "Advocate" instead of "Helper" or "Comforter." In Greek courts, a paraclete would be someone who would testify on your behalf, supporting your case, defending your cause. The Spirit reveals and speaks the truth. The Spirit provides testimony—not just for Jesus' disciples, but for the world to discover and know the truth of Jesus.

We can remember that the Holy Spirit is our Advocate, especially when we are in the midst of trials. When Jesus shares these last words with his friends, he doesn't shy away from the truth that things will be hard for his friends. Following Jesus by loving God's world and all the people in it is not for the faint of heart. This is why Jesus gifted us, the followers of Jesus, with the Holy Spirit.

Author Wes Howard Brook writes in *John's Gospel and the Renewal of the Church* that "the Paraclete is there for the church in both the breathing in (comfort) and breathing out (advocacy)." When there are challenges in this world, the Holy Spirit gives us the comfort we need, in deep breaths that fill our hearts and minds, and the courage we need to breathe out, testify and speak boldly. We enter the stand as witnesses to the truth of Jesus and the brokenness of the world. We do not face our future alone or unequipped, but with the Spirit.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Can you think of a time that the Spirit exposed or revealed a truth to you about yourself? How was this challenging? How was it comforting? How did you respond?

THE SPIRIT IS OUR RESOURCE

Before Christmas, our congregation's staff members draw names for a "Secret Santa" gift exchange. At the staff Christmas party, just before a gift is given, there is this funny moment when we are all guessing, wondering who will receive the gift. *Is this one for me?* It's a little like waiting to be chosen for a team as a child. *Will they choose me? Am I loved? Will I be forgotten?*

Sometimes it feels this way when we think of the Holy Spirit. Seeing other people who are so obviously alive with the Spirit, we might begin to wonder where our portion is. We might even wonder if we could ever earn or deserve the gift of the Spirit. We ask ourselves: *Can I be that full of the Spirit? Will I ever receive this gift too?* The answer according to Scripture: Yes!

My family loves to play Settlers of Catan. This board game asks players to collect resources like wheat and wool, and to build the most towns, roads and armies. The resources make the building possible. This simple game reminds me that the Spirit is our resource too, making it possible for us to work for God to build community, construct goodness and provide scaffolding for justice. Our ability to live and love as God's people is made possible by God's gift of the Holy Spirit. But unlike a board game, this gift isn't given to a lucky few who get a good dice roll. The gift of the Holy Spirit comes to all of us.

ALIGHTING ON US

📖 **Read:** Matthew 3:13-17

At Jesus' baptism, the heavens opened and the Spirit came to Jesus. "He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (v. 16). We seldom talk about things "alighting" on people these days, but the word means "coming, arriving, falling." The form of this verb shows that this arrival of the Holy Spirit didn't just come and go. The Spirit

came and stayed with Jesus, until the time came for him to pass the Spirit on to his followers.

When the Spirit came, Jesus heard the truth of his identity, his relationship with God and his purpose: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (v. 17). When we are baptized, the Spirit alights on us too. We are also given the Spirit, and the Spirit stays with us. Like Jesus, through the water and the word, we are named as God's beloved children and given a purpose—to live the love we've been given. We are "sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever" (*ELW*, p. 231). Knowing that nothing can take that Spirit of Love away gives us power to love and live as God's people.

According to tradition, when Martin Luther heard voices (from within and outside himself) that tempted, taunted or frightened him, he would shout: "I am baptized!" He understood that the power to withstand those forces came from his identity as God's own beloved child. Tapping into this resource gave him what he needed to live boldly and faithfully. The same can be true for us.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. What does your baptismal identity give you the power to do? Are you aware of this power? Can you think of any people, practices or habits that help you "plug into" this power?

GIVEN TO ALL

📖 **Read:** 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Who receives the Holy Spirit? How does Paul describe the Spirit's work?

When Paul wrote to the church he had founded in Corinth, he was addressing a community that was experiencing conflict. Some people were claiming a special kind of status because of their particular spiritual gifts. The same thing still happens today in our communities when we compare our spiritual or other abilities, deciding that those around us are more or less “spirit-filled” or worthy than we are.

Paul’s words to the Corinthian people provide us with a course correction. Paul explains: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7). All of us are given gifts through the Spirit. While these gifts are different, each gift is from the Spirit and each gift matters. Each is a gift from God, for a purpose.

We have seen unique manifestations of the Spirit become evident in people during the worst of the pandemic. Quilters put away their projects to make hundreds of masks. High school kids formed their own tech helplines for elderly parishioners figuring out online worship and created apps for seniors needing to sign up for vaccines. Kids began games of tic-tac-toe on window glass between them and nursing home residents. Government leaders distributed stimulus checks. A parishioner from my congregation ordered meals with such regularity to support a local Black-owned restaurant that she could legitimately say, “My spiritual gift is ordering takeout.” None of these gifts or actions needed a university degree or deep theological understanding, just people willing to share their gifts and faithful hearts.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Say these words aloud: “I am activated by the Holy Spirit. I am gifted by the Holy Spirit.” How does it feel in your body to hear that?
11. What are your Holy Spirit gifts? If you are not sure, take some time on your own

to visit the Women of the ELCA website and download “Gifts for You: Opening your spiritual gifts,” a free resource available at www.womenoftheelca.org/filebin/pdf/resources/SpiritualGifts.pdf.

12. In what ways (prayer, music, fellowship, Bible study, listening or other activities) do you draw from the Holy Spirit to empower you to use those gifts?

CONCLUSION

So who receives this gift of the Spirit? The Spirit works in and through all God’s people in many ways. When our pride makes us too big or shame shrinks us, the Spirit empowers us to claim our unique giftedness. And when we doubt ourselves, the Spirit testifies to the truth that we are God’s beloved children, marked with the cross of Christ forever. The Spirit continues to reveal Christ to us, and continues to give us what we need to be God’s people.

CLOSING: A BREATH PRAYER

Pray as a group, with each participant in the Bible study offering their prayer concerns and requests.

Spend a few moments in silence.

Inhale and imagine filling your whole body and heart with breath.

Say: *Holy Spirit, You are my Comforter.*

Exhale slowly and fully.

Say: *Holy Spirit, activate your love in me.*

Repeat these words, taking deep breaths in and out, with each repetition.

Say: *Thank you, Lord, for the gift of the Spirit. Amen.* 🙏

The gift of the Spirit: A divine wild goose chase

Session one

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OVERVIEW

The goal of this study is to deepen our understanding of the Holy Spirit's actions in Scripture and in our lives. Outside of Pentecost Sunday, we don't spend much time talking about the Holy Spirit in Lutheran and other mainline Christian churches in the U.S. But the Spirit has done—and is still doing—amazing things. Most of the time we miss it or fail to name those actions as Spirit-filled. Like a wild goose chase, or a bird-watching lesson, this study equips us with Spirit-sighting skills—but through the lens of the Bible rather than binoculars.

Session one begins by helping us to connect the Holy Spirit to the rest of the Trinity. If it feels a bit confusing, lean into the mystery of it. None of us really “get” the Trinity. We'll spend time looking at Jesus' farewell discourse, where he says that the Spirit is a way for Jesus' truth, teaching and presence to be with us even after his ascension. Then we'll talk about the ways the Spirit serves as our resource, giving us what we need to be God's people. Finally, we'll explore 1 Corinthians and claim the truth that the Spirit is given to each of us.

SESSION GOALS

- Deepen understanding of the Holy Spirit's partnership within the three persons of the Trinity
- Link the work of the Holy Spirit with the life,

teaching and truth of Jesus

- Recognize that the Spirit is poured into our lives through baptism, giving us gifts for the common good

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU HAVE?

Every month at the congregation I serve, I put together a guide for the women who will lead these Gather Bible studies in their Women of the ELCA circles. With faithfulness and grace, these women commit and prepare to lead Bible study. That's alongside the other important matters of service, planning, togetherness and coffee. Every month as I offer some suggestions, I begin with a sentence like, “This is a great study, but there is just too much in it!”

Well, this study isn't much different. There are a lot of sightings of the Holy Spirit throughout Scripture, so as we track the Divine Wild Goose, there will be much to cover (and lots left out). If you will be leading this Bible study within a shorter time frame (30, 60 or 90 minutes), here are three variations for what to keep and what to skip.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the Introduction.
2. Skip ahead and read John 14:15-19, 25-31
3. Read and discuss “The revelatory Spirit: Jesus with us,” “Good company on the way” and questions #2-5.
4. Skip ahead to read or share “The Spirit is our resource.”
5. Skip ahead to read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.
6. Read and discuss “Given to all” and questions #9-11.

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

In addition to the “short study” above, read “Alighting on us” and Matthew 3:13-17, and discuss question #8.

EVEN LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

In addition to the “short study,” read “Alighting on us.” Read Matthew 3:13-17; John 14:15-19, 25-31; and John 15:26—16:15, and discuss question #8.

FULL BIBLE STUDY (90 MINUTES TO 2 HOURS)

I know some groups and individuals use the entire study, allowing for longer discussions, which I believe is worthwhile! But many people will do something more truncated, so use the guidelines above to help. If your group does end up doing a shortened version, I invite members individually to read this study in a contemplative way, where after you read the Scripture verses, you reflect on the questions in your journal or in a quiet time of prayer.

NOTES FOR LEADERS

1. Take time for introductions

Even if people know each other well, a simple question can help to deepen our connections with each other. For fun, begin this session with a question about birds. Ask, “Do you have a favorite bird, or a kinship with a particular kind of bird?” (This might seem silly, but you might be surprised by how birds bring blessings to people.)

2. Questions that follow readings

Discussion/reflection questions often follow immediately after Bible verses are read. This is done intentionally, to make space for people to name their own insights and things they notice. Let these questions help you embody the truth that the Holy Spirit works in and through all of us and reveals something about Jesus to all of us. The Spirit works to help us hear and read Scripture in expansive ways that could never be captured by one writer. So make space for people to explore and share, before jumping in with the study’s commentary.

3. On the breath prayer

As you will see in the next session, the Spirit and breath are linked. Breath prayers, simple acts of contemplative prayer, ground us in our bodies and in the moment. Taking time in these quiet prayers at the end of the study can help your participants absorb and ponder how the Spirit might be working in their lives. As St. Benedict said, this helps us “listen with the ear of our hearts.”

BLESSINGS, PRAYERS AND MORE

Thanksgiving for baptism

As part of your closing prayers, consider bringing out a bowl of water and taking time to remember your baptisms (see ELW, p. 97). After these words of thanksgiving are spoken, take turns marking one another’s foreheads with a water cross as you say something like, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

Poetry

This study grew out of a series of studies I did for family campers at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp during the summers of 2012 and 2017. I would begin each session with a word of poetry. There are some beautiful poems that intersect with these readings, including two of my favorites from Mary Oliver: “The Wild Geese” and “Poem (the spirit likes to dress up).”

So, leaders, I encourage you: trust yourself, listen, be confident and let the Spirit lead you! 🌿