



The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, St. Peter's Church, Columbia, February 5, 2023

"The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:10).

When ice forms on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, people walk out on to the frozen surface, to cut holes in the ice to fish for trout. I saw this myself back in the 1980s, when I took my youth group on a ski trip to a nearby lodge. I imagine the ice is thinner these days, but maybe not this particular weekend in New England, when the land is locked in a deep winter chill. You walk out onto the ice, but underneath are hidden depths: disorienting if you have trouble with heights. It's as if you are suspended over a great gulf below. The ground seems firm, but beneath your feet the water is moving, full of life.

When the Holy Spirit first shows up in the Scriptures, it's moving over the face of the waters, stirring things up at the beginning of creation. *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters"* (Gen. 1:1-2). The Spirit here is a mighty wind, the same wind which blows at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit overtakes the disciples. At creation, the face of the deep is not frozen like Winnepesaukee, but it's just as alive with possibility, as the Spirit moves upon it.

St. Paul in our reading today claims that the Spirit searches everything: that is, investigates or examines all that is. The *"depths of God"* (1 Cor. 2:10), as Paul puts it, indicate mystery, hidden qualities within God that were always present but only revealed by the Spirit. Paul tells us that what is revealed is *"God's wisdom"* (1 Cor. 2:7): the deep wisdom of a life that does not end in death, but rises from devastation to new life and resurrection. He calls it a wisdom that is *"secret and hidden"* (1 Cor. 2:7). It's wisdom, but not as the world counts wisdom.

St. Paul goes on to say that what is also revealed by the Spirit, hidden in God's depths, are the gifts that God has prepared for us. *"Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God"* (1 Cor. 2:12).. The Spirit is searching the depths of God and bringing out of those deep places spiritual gifts that are distributed to the members of the church: spiritual gifts that are rooted in the hidden wisdom of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul has a number of lists of spiritual gifts, scattered through his letters, but I like this one from Paul's Letter to the Galatians: *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Gal. 5:22-23). From the deep places of God emerges the fruit of the Spirit, the signs of new and transformed life. These gifts are shared with the members of the Church. These, too, are revealed by the Spirit, who searches the depths of God and brings them forth from within us.

Now, the trouble is that human beings, rather than knowing and understanding the hidden wisdom of God, are locked in sin and death, frozen solid as a lake in a New England winter. We're skating around on the surface of things, walking on the edge of an abyss, and ignoring what turns out to be thin ice under our feet. Most of the time we're hardly aware of what lies beneath.

The writer Georges Bernanos once wrote in his diary, "We do not know ourselves. Sin makes us live on the surface of ourselves..." (John Saward, *The Way of the Lamb*). There are hidden depths within us that are both terrifying and wonderful; as St. Paul says in our reading, *"For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?"* (1 Cor. 2:11). We need to go beyond the surface and discover the deep source of life that lies within.

God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, breaks the frozen winter of our sin, and brings forth life for us from the deep places of God. As in the beginning of creation, the Spirit is now moving over the face of the water, stirring things up and bringing forth life from the deep. With God there is forgiveness and transformation, the breaking of the ice. His grace, bestowed abundantly, is a gift that in God's wisdom leads to new life for us.

St. Peter's Church: you too have been given gifts by God, just as St. Paul says in our reading. The Holy Spirit is searching the depths of God to bring forth new possibilities for us here in this parish. That Spirit helps us to understand the gifts we've been given. There are new ministries that will emerge as we feel the call, and open ourselves to the Spirit's searching power. The Spirit is the source of the gift, and the One who knows us better than we know ourselves (Rom. 8:27), as Paul says in Romans. We need to stop skating on the surface of things, on the surface of ourselves, and discover the depths of the new life that is within us.

- The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

