

## ***Surrendering to the Spirit***

Luke 21:5-19

November 18, 2007

### **I.**

Most of you know that the readings we hear each Sunday are part of a schedule called the Lectionary. They have been selected by people in the church who know about such things, and are based on the season of the church year or some other theological consideration. And there are times I don't understand why they made their selections. Today is one of those days.

We heard in the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah that God was going to create new heavens and a new earth. People would be blessed and enjoy life. We would live to be one hundred years old or more. The wolf and the lamb would eat together.

But this was followed by the Gospel. Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, and not one stone left on top of another. There would be wars and insurrections, and his disciples would be persecuted and killed.

What's a preacher to do with this? There are a lot of sermons in these readings, and there's a danger of trying to talk about so many different things that nothing is said well. It reminds me of the story of the fellow whose wife went to church while he stayed home. When she returned he asked her how the sermon was. She hesitated, and said "O.K., I guess." The husband persisted and asked, "well, what did he preach about?" "I don't know," she replied, "he never did say."

Hopefully, I can avoid that problem because I want to focus on a specific part of today's Gospel. It's the part where Jesus told his disciples they would be persecuted and arrested, and be brought before kings and governors. And he told them not to worry about what they would say because words would be given to them at the time.

Jesus was even more explicit in the version of this same story in Mark's Gospel where he said, "When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (13:11). And in John's Gospel Jesus told them that when the Spirit comes "he will guide you into all the truth" (16:13).

### **II.**

We know that Jesus' ministry did not end with his death. God intended that future generations would have the same knowledge of him as people who were alive when he walked among us. That's why Jesus told the disciples that when he left this earth God would send a comforter, a counselor, an advocate to be with them and guide them (Jn. 14:16).

Today, I would like to talk about that comforter, or advocate, or counselor, which we know to be the Holy Spirit. And we will consider who the Holy Spirit is, what the Spirit does, and how the Spirit affects our lives.

In a few minutes we will say the Nicene Creed. We will affirm that "we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified."

What does this mean? Most people have a good understanding of the Father and the Son, but sometimes are less certain about the Holy Spirit. Our ideas about the Spirit can be more vague and undefined, and not something we grasp in the same way as creation or salvation, for example.

Now, I'm about to step into deep theological waters at this point. Perhaps this would be a good time for someone to ring the Sanctus bells. Please bear with me for some very brief background.

We know God exists as three persons in one being, and we refer to God in this way as the Holy Trinity. We believe in one God, who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who also are three distinct, but yet completely interrelated, forms of existence. All three share the same essence as one God, even though they are three separate divine beings.

This might be hard to grasp with our earthly laws of physics that say two (or three) objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But God exists beyond our physical laws. When we consider who God is, we cannot comprehend the mystery of God in terms of time or space. On the other hand, when we think of what God does, we realize he is very much involved in our time, and in our space.

We distinguish between who God is, out there in eternity, and what God does, down here on earth. And down here, the Holy Spirit manifests God's presence. The Holy Spirit is God's agent to us. When we think about God, we might envision the Father or the Son. But when we experience God, when we feel God, when God works in our lives, it is through the Holy Spirit.

So, there is a mystery about who Holy Spirit is, but there also is a reality to what the Holy Spirit does. We know from today's Gospel reading, for example, that one of the roles of the Spirit was to strengthen and support the apostles in their ministry after Christ's death. And Scripture also tells us that the Spirit enables us to experience Christ as the apostles experienced him when he was in their midst. The Spirit is the link between Jesus' ministry two thousand years ago, and our lives in the church he left behind.

Through that link we know the Father and the Son because the Spirit reveals them to us. We know God's will for us because the Spirit makes it known. We pray to God and have a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. We experience God's grace and love because they are expressed in the work of the Spirit. We are able to understand Scripture because the Spirit leads us in truth. And we have faith in our salvation through the assurance in our hearts given by the Holy Spirit.

### **III.**

Now, there is a subtle but important distinction here. It's important to understand that the Holy Spirit is a divine person, not some mysterious power. If you think of the Spirit as some sort of power or force, you might be likely to ask the wrong question. You might want to know how you can get more of the Spirit. That's a pagan idea. As Christians we don't want to have more of the Spirit. We want the Spirit to have more of us.

If we think we can go out and acquire the Spirit, then we make the error of seeking something others might not have. We could be in danger of exalting ourselves. On the other hand, if we give ourselves to the Spirit, then we can experience God's love and grace as we receive and extend that love to others. It's more than just a matter of perspective.

So what do we mean when we pray, "come Holy Spirit"? What do we mean we say we want to be filled by the Spirit? Doesn't that sound like we might be trying to get more of the Spirit into us instead of giving more of ourselves to the Spirit?

Here's the answer. The Spirit is among us now. God's Spirit is in the world, everywhere, all the time. We can look at creation and see the glory of God in it, and we see it because the Spirit tells us that's what it is. Without the Spirit we would not know.

But if we try to reach out and grab some of the Spirit, if we try to transfer some of the Spirit from the world to ourselves, it won't work. I have been to church workshops, and small group

meetings, and other settings where people hoped they could walk out of the room with more of the Spirit than they had when they walked in. It's as if they thought they could increase their spirituality by believing they could increase the amount of the Spirit within them. But it doesn't happen that way.

The Spirit doesn't increase in us. We increase in the Spirit. We don't open the door, so to speak, and reach in and grab some of the Spirit. Instead we open the door, walk through it and let the Spirit grab us. When we do that we are surrendering, not acquiring. And when we surrender the Holy Spirit will come, and we will be filled, and we will experience God and be led in the way of wisdom and truth, and we will know the love God has for us as his children.

#### **IV.**

A sermon on the Holy Spirit might not be complete without a few words about baptism. Our faith tells us that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit at baptism. And that actually happens, even though we don't see anything supernatural going on at the time. The Spirit enters all of us at baptism, and resides within us as a glowing ember, so to speak.

For some people, the ember remains an ember and never becomes more. And for those people the Spirit is not part of their lives. For others, however, faith can fan that ember into flames, and those flames can show forth through them and in all they do. Some churches refer to that as fire baptism, or baptism in the Holy Spirit, as distinguished from water baptism. But apart from labels, what it really means is surrendering to the Spirit, not quenching the Spirit, and allowing the Spirit to take over; to have more of us.

And sometimes we hear testimonies about how that ember of the Spirit within someone has been fanned into flames in a flash-bang moment. Some people have had those types of conversion experiences. For most of us, however, it takes time. We surrender to the Spirit, but the fruits of that surrender might not be apparent in just one day. It can be a gradually unfolding thing, a transformation that develops as we try to live holy lives, and as the Spirit brings us to repentance when we fall short.

#### **V.**

So we see that the Spirit guides us now, and offers a foretaste of things to come. Through the Spirit we are drawn closer to Christ so we can know God's will for us, and be strengthened to do his will in a fallen world where we are surrounded by temptations to do otherwise.

And we live in the Spirit through our own piety, and through the church. We do it through prayer, through meditation, through interaction with others in the church, and through trying to live a holy life. And even then, for all our efforts, the Spirit is in control. Our assurance is that if we surrender, if we follow the instructions Jesus gave his disciples in today's lesson, then we will follow the Spirit and victory will be ours. *Amen.*