

God With Us

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15, Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2009

I.

Today, the Day of Pentecost, sometimes is described as the birthday of the church. We celebrate a real event in history, when the Holy Spirit came into the world and united Jesus' followers as a new and vital community that eventually would become the worldwide Christian church.

And we also celebrate the Spirit working in our lives individually. Just as the disciples were strengthened by the Spirit, we also can draw closer to God when the Spirit guides us.

At times, however, the Holy Spirit can be overlooked in our understandings about God. Sometimes the Spirit can be the missing person in the Trinity. We probably think that we know about the Father and the Son, but the Spirit might seem a bit more remote.

I'm reminded of the story about the little girl and the Holy Ghost. And, of course, Holy Ghost was the term used to describe the Holy Spirit many years ago, and still is used in our Rite I services. Well, this girl had been told in Sunday School that the Holy Ghost lived in the church, and so she went searching everywhere. Her parents finally noticed she was not around, and found her in the attic. She explained that she thought the Holy Ghost probably was up there.

In some ways that story can describe many of us. We might have a tendency to keep the Holy Spirit in the attic while we worship the Father and Son down here on the main floor. Today, however, I will ask us to think about the importance of the Spirit in our lives and worship.

And of course, in two weeks we will celebrate Trinity Sunday here at St. Thomas. We will examine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in greater detail, both in terms of what they are as the Trinity, and what they do as the Trinity.

Please keep that distinction in mind. We will wait until Trinity Sunday to talk about what the Holy Spirit is. Today, however, we will take a more functional approach and focus on what the Spirit actually does in our lives.

II.

We could begin with some background. Several times before his death Jesus told the disciples that he was going to leave them. What did they think this meant for them? Was everything going to be all over, for good?

Consider this from the disciples' perspective. They had traveled with Jesus for almost three years, according to John's Gospel. They witnessed his miracles, and saw him cast out demons. They were part of the crowds and the excitement that Jesus generated, and they experienced the charismatic force of his personality. Was it all suddenly going to end? Would they all just go back to their old jobs?

No, they would not. That was not God's plan. Jesus did not come into the world only to teach and preach to people who were alive at the time. Jesus came to reveal God to humanity for all time, and he came to make God's love known for all time. But we also know that Jesus left the world, and that's where the Holy Spirit enters the picture.

The Holy Spirit came to pick up where Jesus left off. The Spirit came to carry on in the world after Jesus ascended to heaven. As Jesus' work on earth came to an end the Holy Spirit's work began. Everything that Scripture tells us about God the Father and our Lord and Savior in Biblical times is made real in our lives today through the working of the Spirit.

For example, two thousand years ago people who saw and listened to Jesus could receive him in their hearts. Today, the Spirit enables us to receive Christ into our hearts. When Jesus was alive he proclaimed God's will for us. Now the Spirit can reveal God's will for us. Jesus actually explained Scripture to his listeners. Today the Spirit can open the meaning of Scripture to us. With that background, let's briefly look at today's readings about the Spirit.

III.

We can begin with the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. Although the Spirit came into the world during New Testament times, there are many references to the Spirit by the early Hebrews. The difference is that the Spirit in the Old Testament was not a permanent presence in the world. Early Jews did not conceptualize opening themselves to the Spirit any more than they understood the Son as divinely God. For them, God was the Father alone.

When, however, Jesus came into the world, the Spirit was not far behind. It began, as we heard in John's Gospel, with Jesus' promise on the night before he died. He said that he would not leave a void in the lives of his followers, and that he would send the Spirit to guide and comfort them as well as all believers for all time. They would not be left alone.

And then it actually happened, as we heard in the reading from the Book of Acts, when the Spirit dramatically came in wind and flames to rest upon Jesus' followers and to change their lives and our lives forever. The church was born, and if we would continue our reading in Acts for a few more verses, we would learn that three thousand people became part of the community on that first day (2:41).

From that point onward, the disciples and Jesus' followers were changed men and women. Whereas some of Jesus' teachings earlier seemed elusive, now all was clear as they steadfastly set out to preach the Gospel and began to establish communities of faith. Their work over the following decades is wonderfully recorded in the Book of Acts, which is an essential part of the Bible because it explains how the Christian story moved from Jesus to the work of St. Paul.

And as a result of what happened that day, the Holy Spirit is here for us as an enduring example of God's grace to humanity. Certainly, salvation in the next world is at the center of our faith. But the Spirit at work in this world is inherent in our hopes of fulfilling God's purposes for us. Through the Spirit we receive God's gifts, know God's will, and are led to a Christian life.

IV.

But, what does all this mean for us now. Should we still expect the Holy Spirit to appear in a rush of wind with tongues of flame? Probably not, although with God all things are possible. It is more likely that we would experience the Spirit as an insight, or an inspiration, or feeling of peace and comfort, or as a nudge or sense of prompting. And the Spirit might be known to us in response to our prayers, or it might be in a way we did not anticipate at all.

I believe I have encountered the Spirit over the years, mostly in subtle ways that became apparent after the fact. On a very few occasions, however, the sense was more evident. One of these occasions was on October 8, 1991. I was a partner in an international law firm that had just opened an office in Moscow to advise on business opportunities in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, which had happened a few months earlier.

There was a lot of competition among law firms in Washington to develop Russian legal business, and we were among the competitors. In this setting I received an invitation from a wealthy and prominent Washington businessman to attend a dinner he was hosting for the new Russian Minister of Labor who was visiting America. This was an important invitation that could produce benefits for the firm, and I accepted immediately.

I also had another option that evening. It was a routine invitation to attend one of the many receptions that a group of single people in Washington, of which I was one at the time, was hosting. There were many of these, and I did not give it a second thought.

Well, I went to the snazzy dinner party, and even during the social time before the food was served I felt strangely compelled to leave that house. It seemed like someone was sitting on my chest, nothing in a medical sense, but certainly enough to get my attention. And it was almost like I heard a voice saying, "You have to get out of here, go to the other party."

And so I did. I left the house without speaking to anyone. For some reason the valet had parked my car right out front. I remembered where the other party was, and drove straight there. As I walked in the room I looked over the crowd and saw Susan for the first time. It was like she was in technicolor and the rest of the room was in black and white. And the rest is history.

I am convinced it was the Holy Spirit. I felt pulled by a force I could not resist. And because I had experienced it I pay attention when other people describe similar events in their lives. There always seems to be the common factor of unexplainable spiritual compulsion.

Most of the time, however, the Spirit is more discreet. A difficult problem suddenly is resolved. A passage of Scripture takes on new meaning. Anxiety, worry, or agitation is replaced by a feeling of comfort or acceptance. Our faith seems stronger. A light bulb goes on, or we have one of those "eureka!" moments. Maybe we think back on an unanticipated blessing and wonder, "How did that happen?" I believe those moments come from living in the Spirit.

But, I also should say there is a risk involved with listening to what we think might be the Spirit. There can be compulsions or promptings that do not come from the Spirit. They can arise from our own natures, or predispositions, or wishful thinking. They also can be proclaimed by what the Bible calls false prophets, and what we today might see as people who twist God's words for their own unrighteous purposes. And, of course, they can be products of that little demon who sits on our shoulders and whispers bad ideas into our ears.

We are not without resources to deal with this. The Spirit is from God, and does not lead anyone into something that is contrary to Scripture (1 Jn. 4:1). If we truly stop, think, and pray when we have these kind of questions, we can know which is which.

V.

And so we, as Christians, are called to live as Christ taught and preached. We can't do it all the time, but we can try. And the most important partner we have is the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we know God, not as some fierce old figure with a long beard, but as the giver of peace, as the source of love, and as our strength and support in good times and bad.

The Holy Spirit is more than some vague and undefined presence that roams through the Book of Common Prayer on Sunday mornings. The Spirit continues in our lives as nothing less than revelation of God and the continuation of the work of our Lord and Savior. And only with the help of the Spirit can we truly know them. *Amen.*