

Karla Hunt

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

Sermon for 9 Jan at StP

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You may recall that I've referred to my early churching as being raised in an evangelical tradition. When I use this term, I mean there was a real emphasis on being 'born again' and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. During my childhood, every service ended with an altar call where one goes to the front of the church, kneels at the altar and gives one's life to the Lord while the organist plays "Just As I Am" or something similar. These services could evoke a strong emotional reaction and, in some churches, even a state of ecstasy in response to the movement of the Spirit. I've answered my share of altar calls growing up so can attest to the presence of the Spirit in my own heart on these occasions; the need to respond was real and not to be denied.

I mention this because our lessons today are all about the Holy Spirit and how it works. The reading from Acts tells us about Peter and John praying and laying hands on the Samaritans who had been baptized by Philip. And the gospel reading reminds us that while Jesus was praying after his own baptism, the Spirit descended in the body of a dove. In both of these passages, the movement of the Spirit is very physical and given as a result of prayer in preparation for ministry. In fact, one commentator states "...believers are *unable* to participate fully in the community's missionary vocation *without* receiving the gift of

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the Holy Spirit..."¹ which is why Peter and John felt it necessary to travel from Jerusalem to Samaria to ensure that the newly baptized receive this gift. The Spirit prepares the heart and mind so that ministry is according to the will of God; ministry without this gift is difficult and problematic, and often unsuccessful.

So exactly what *is* the Holy Spirit, what does it do and how do we receive it?

PAUSE

The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary says the Holy Spirit is "the mysterious power or presence of God in nature or with individuals and communities, inspiring or empowering them with qualities they would not otherwise possess."²

As Episcopalians, we refer to the Holy Spirit in worship all the time. The Nicene Creed helps us understand that the Spirit is in relationship with God the Father and God the Son when we say, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son."³ With this understanding, the Holy Spirit represents

¹ NIBC, page 109

² HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, page 432

³ Book of Common Prayer, page 358

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“both the presence and activity of God and the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the church.”⁴

If this is a little confusing, it's helpful for me to think of the concept of the Holy Spirit as the attempt to explain an experience of God that's ultimately unexplainable.

PAUSE

The Holy Spirit, then, is the presence of God that empowers us to do God's work. One commentator calls “the Holy Spirit ... the common property of an inclusive community ...” If, according to the book of Acts, the mission of the church is to continue Jesus' ministry, then the Holy Spirit is the glue that binds the church together. Think about the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit descended with the roaring of the wind and tongues of fire dancing above the heads of the disciples enabling them to speak in languages they didn't know. *That's* an experience that would connect people to each other!

PAUSE

The Spirit does indeed work in these large, dramatic ways but that's not the only way. She also works in small personal ways like when

⁴ *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, page 432

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you feel a nudge to do something in particular or when the Lord puts a certain person on your heart. I remember one time in my early years as a hospital volunteer when God literally put words in my mouth. I walked into a room explaining why I was there and the patient said ‘tell me what you believe.’ As I was panicking with how to simplify the Episcopal faith, I heard a voice say “God is good and he loves us very much.” I turned around to see who was behind me but there was no one—it was *my* voice but the *words* were God’s. That’s the way the Lord works.

I have no doubt you have stories like this of your own. Times when there was no other reason for what you were experiencing other than the gift of the Spirit.

Perhaps it was a time when you were pouring your heart out in prayer, anxious and worried, and suddenly the burden lifted and your heart was light and free. Maybe it was a time that you had an unexpected urge to stop and see someone that you had lost touch with only to find out when you arrived, that they had just gotten a diagnosis of cancer and needed a friend. Or maybe the Lord said ‘pray for this person now’ and you do, even though you don’t know why and then you find out later there was an emergency. Perhaps prayer is a form of cosmic energy that multiplies when more people are praying. This too is the way God works.

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PAUSE

When we're sitting on the corner, Christine and I often find that the Spirit sends us someone to pray with and then gives us the words that person needs to hear. Occasionally the words that come through us will so touch their heart that they are visibly shaken and in tears. What a gift! It's truly the Holy Spirit creating new relationships between God and God's people.

PAUSE

How then do we receive this gift?

John's ministry of repentance and turning to the Lord is a necessary prerequisite for Jesus' ministry of forgiveness and love. The first step has to be recognition of the *need* to be transformed before *acceptance* of the transformation can begin. The agent of transformation is the Holy Spirit and the gift is always in response to prayer from an open and loving heart. The gift is free but we have to ask for it.

And we don't just receive this gift for our own benefit, we receive on behalf of others, we receive in order to be empowered to continue the work Jesus started: the work of loving and forgiving and spreading the

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good news, building relationships of connectivity between people with God and people with each other.

PAUSE

One of the things I struggled with when discerning ordination was that I would have to vow to “be loyal to the doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as this Church has received them”⁵ This made me wonder ‘what exactly *do* I believe?’ We who have been raised in the church and who strive to bring our children up here, recognize that knowledge or practice alone is not enough and much of what we try to teach is complicated and difficult to explain. So perhaps there has to be some sense of a personal experience that leads one to true faith.; experiences like Paul on the road to Damascus or the disciples at Pentecost or my experience in the hospital room, perhaps even responding to an altar call: experiences that touch the heart and mind and blow doubt completely out of the water. Very person experiences with only one explanation: it has to be God.

Do I know or understand everything that I should? Hardly, but I believe, I know! God is good and loves us very much. I have no doubt about that whatsoever and so I trust in the Lord that everything else will resolve itself without my help or interference. And for me the

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, page 539

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Episcopal Church is more correct than anything else I've encountered but I respect and honor the traditions of others knowing that there are many truths and Jesus said "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold."⁶ So here I am, trying to do my best and trusting in the guidance of the Spirit.

PAUSE

When I see God's children who have fallen away, including my own, I have to trust that in the fullness of time, the Holy Spirit will make herself known and all will be well. As a parent, this is really hard for me but knowing God loves my girls so much more than I ever can, gives me comfort and peace. I know God wants only what is best for them and for all of us. All will be indeed be well.

PAUSE

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit: it's all about relationship. The Holy Spirit is given to us in order to help us achieve this kind of unity, to encourage, empower and enable us to build relationship, to establish and maintain community and to make God known to the world.

⁶ John 10:16

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PAUSE

“Keep the faith” is a common phrase that encourages us to endure and continue in the work we are doing against difficult odds.

My prayer for us at St. Peter’s is: don’t just keep the faith, spread it. Let your light *so shine* that people who see you will *absolutely know* that you love all people. The Holy Spirit will help you do this.

And then we can truly say, “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine...”⁷

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ *Book of Common Prayer*, page 126

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