

A Sermon
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Bryans Road, Maryland
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When the Holy Spirit Is in You

John 14:15-27; 15:26-16:15

Two Sundays ago, when I preached on the occasion of Bethany's baptism, Mark's Gospel gathered us at the Jordan River for the baptism of our Lord Jesus himself. In addition to highlighting what Jesus heard, Mark also stresses what Jesus saw, namely, "heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove" (1:10). This image of the Spirit, making its way down like a dove, is one of the ways the Bible describes God's saving presence in and through Jesus Christ.

A pastor once attempted to dramatize the coming of the Spirit. He arranged for the church custodian to release a pigeon at the point in the service when he said, "And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove." The service began, and at the proper moment, the pastor said, "The Holy Spirit descended like a dove." But no bird appeared. He repeated the words, but still nothing happened. Then the custodian cried out in a loud voice, "Preacher, a cat done ate that there Spirit bird! Do you want me to throw down the cat?"

When it comes to the gift of the Holy Spirit, we often think of Luke's account of the Pentecost experience in the book of Acts. According to Luke, the followers of Jesus were together on the day of Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit descended on them with a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. What appeared to be tongues of fire came to rest on each of them. So in this particular account, wind and fire are the dominant images.

In my previous church, I designed a worship banner that could be hung on the pulpit during the celebration of Pentecost. It actually brought together symbols from both the Gospels and Acts. The background was bright red, one of the colors frequently used to represent this portion of the church's story. In the center of the banner I placed images of a dove and some flames. Many people were able to make the connections between the banner and the biblical images. But there was one person who said that the dove over the flames might be taken as an indication that we were having fried chicken after church.

In today's Scripture readings from the Gospel of John, we find that he has his own take on the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Near the end of his Gospel, John says that when Jesus appeared to his disciples on Easter evening, he said to them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:21-22). Notice how John ties the gift of the Spirit to the image of breath, which is linked to the image of wind. In the Bible, breath and wind are frequently associated with the work of God's Spirit.

But this scene where Jesus blesses his disciples with the Holy Spirit is not the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus has spoken of the Spirit. Earlier, in a section known as "The Farewell Discourse" (14:1-16:33), Jesus prepares his disciples for their life after his return to God. Jesus' words reflect a crisis in the early church about how believers will have access to him after he has ascended to the Father.

It helps to put ourselves in the shoes of those first disciples. They were frightened and distressed at the thought of Jesus' leaving them. If he goes, it'll be more than just the loss of a teacher and friend. Jesus is God's Son. He's the disciples' point of access to God. He's the way they have come to know who God is. Jesus has opened up the possibility of their becoming children of God. Jesus is God revealing his love, God walking among them. As John's Gospel puts it, in Jesus "the Word became flesh" and took up residence among us (1:14). So naturally Jesus' disciples wonder, What will happen when Jesus is gone? Will we still have access to him and to the God he reveals? Was this revelation available only to us while Jesus was here, or will others, who didn't have physical contact with Jesus and his ministry, have the opportunity to meet him and know him? This was a major theological crisis for those first disciples.

The answer to their questions comes in the form of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells them that it's actually for their good that he's going away. Of course, that really left them scratching their heads. How could it be good that the one who is our point of access to God is leaving us? Jesus then explains, saying, "Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). The word translated in the NIV as "Counselor" is the Greek term "Paraclete," which has a wide range of meanings. It can mean "the one who exhorts," "the one who comforts," "the one who helps," and "the one who makes appeals on one's behalf." In his Gospel, John draws upon all these meanings, emphasizing a different part of the Holy Spirit's work in different passages.

In all these ways, the Holy Spirit is the one who makes it possible for us to have access to the experience of God and the relationship with God that are available through Jesus. In the absence of Jesus' physical presence, the Spirit conveys the presence and influence of Jesus to us. In other words, in order for you to know Jesus, you don't have to wish that you could climb into a time machine and travel back to first century Palestine so that you could meet him. You can encounter him and know him now. Because of the gift of the Spirit, the living Lord isn't bound by time and space. His abiding presence and transforming love weren't just available to the first generation of believers, but to all generations since then, to us now, and to generations that will come after us. The risen Jesus is particularly present to us in the community of his people, especially as we listen to his word and gather at his table.

In the preaching of the word and the breaking of the bread, the Holy Spirit is present, pointing us to Jesus. In today's text, Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, "He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (16:14). So the Spirit doesn't draw attention to himself but points away from himself to Jesus, and to the glory of Jesus. James Packer recalls walking to church one winter evening to preach on Jesus' words, "He will glorify me" (John 16:14). In this verse, "He" refers to the Holy Spirit. Packer says that as he rounded a corner and saw the church building floodlit, he realized this was just the illustration his sermon needed. He points out that when floodlighting is well done, you don't notice the floodlights as much as you notice the building at which they're aimed. The idea is to maximize the beauty and dignity of the building, to make it visible when otherwise it would not be seen for the darkness. This, says Packer, is at the heart of the Holy Spirit's work. The Spirit is "the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior."

"Or think of it this way," says Packer. "It is as if the Spirit stands behind us, throwing light over our shoulder on to Jesus who stands facing us. The Spirit's message to us is never, "Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me," but always, "Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace."¹

This sounds reminiscent of the ministry of John the Baptist, whom we met early in John's Gospel. In the opening section of this Gospel, John the Baptist is introduced as the one who "was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light" (1:8). In other words, John the Baptist consistently points away from himself and toward Jesus. His God-given mission is to testify to who Jesus is and why Jesus has come, and to do so in a way that draws attention to Jesus rather than himself. So it's no wonder, just a couple of chapters later, that John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less" (3:30). Or as it's often rendered, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

There's a piece of art called the Isenheim altarpiece, sculpted and painted by Matthias Grünewald, that captures John the Baptist's identity and purpose. In the painting, John the Baptist is preaching. He stands beside the cross, holding an open Bible. With a long and bony finger he points toward the crucified Christ, thus ensuring that our focus is Jesus. There are other characters and items in the scene, but John's presence, posture, and especially his pointing, guarantee that attention is drawn to the one on the cross.

Speaking of artistic creations, author Aaron Kheriaty has used cathedrals to highlight the self-absorption of our era. He writes:

Of all the amazing features of the medieval cathedrals, one feature stands out as very strange to the modern mind: We have no idea who designed and built them. The architects and builders did not bother to sign their names on the cornerstones. People today might ask, Why build the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Chartres if you can't take credit for it? No lasting fame? No immortalized human glory? We're perplexed by the humility of these forgotten artists who labored in obscurity. Do and disappear? This is not how we roll in the America of the twenty-first century.²

But it is how John the Baptist rolled in the first century. Through humility and anonymity, he anticipated and pointed toward the work of the Holy Spirit, whose will is not to focus on himself but to highlight the work of Jesus the Son to the glory of God the Father.

It only makes sense, then, that anyone who receives the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ will participate in the Holy Spirit's work of bringing glory to Jesus. That means living a life that draws attention to the Son, and promotes praise and thanks to God the Father. In a question and answer period after one of his lectures, C. S. Lewis was asked which of the world's religions gives its followers the greatest happiness. Lewis paused and said, "While it lasts, the religion of worshipping oneself is best."³ In other words, if you want immediate, but very short-term, happiness, create a religion that focuses on worshipping you.

But if it's long-term joy and enduring meaning that you seek, then receive the Holy Spirit through faith in the Son. When the Holy Spirit is in you, you'll be doing what the Spirit does, bearing witness to Jesus. When the Holy Spirit is in you, you'll be pointing to Jesus rather than pointing to yourself. When the Holy Spirit is in you, you'll be drawing attention to Jesus rather than drawing attention to yourself. When the Holy Spirit is in you, you'll be bringing glory to the Jesus rather than bringing glory to yourself.

¹ James Packer, *Your Father Loves You* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1986) n.p.

² Adapted from Aaron Kheriaty, "The Era of the Narcissist," *First Things* (February 16, 2010).

³ C. S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity," Q. 11, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 33-34.