

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
December 19, 2021

## **Come, Holy Spirit**

Luke 1:26-38

There's a concept that floats around a lot this time of year, but it's hard to really get a handle on it. It's called "The Christmas spirit." Ask a variety of people to define it, and you'll get a whole range of ideas. Some will say the Christmas spirit has to do with the emotional warmth or relational closeness that many people experience during the holidays. Some will say the Christmas spirit has to do with an attitude of giving and generosity that prevails in many people's lives. Some will say the Christmas spirit is something that enters our hearts and minds to make us more like we're supposed to be in our attitudes and actions, especially toward others. Some will say the Christmas spirit has to do with the music that fills virtually every space you step into this time of the year, including your house of worship. As I said, the Christmas spirit is a slippery notion. It's an experience, a mood, an atmosphere. It's the kind of thing that's easy to name but hard to define.

And as for what you can do with the Christmas spirit, well that varies too. You can get into it. You can resist it. You can spread it. You can celebrate it. You can invest in it. You can broadcast it. You can try to make the most of it while it's here, knowing that once December 25 comes and goes, the Christmas spirit will begin to dissipate. True, we sometimes dream of keeping the Christmas spirit all year round. But part of what makes it the Christmas spirit is that it's unique to this particular time of the year. This is when we expect it to show up, work its magic on us, and make a graceful exit until next year.

This is different from how God shows up in this morning's text from Luke. When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she's going to be pregnant with a baby who will be the Son of God, Mary responds with a very natural, appropriate question. "How?" "How can this be?" Not the first time we've heard that type of question in Luke's Gospel. Zechariah responded in similar fashion when Gabriel showed up to tell him that Elizabeth would bear him a son. And now here's Gabriel showing up somewhere else, relaying news that doesn't seem to fit with reality. After all, Mary hasn't had sexual intercourse with anyone, which is the way that a new life in the womb starts. But according to Luke, God's creative, life-giving power isn't bound by normal human expectations and practices.

So Gabriel doesn't have to pause and think carefully about how to answer Mary's question. The answer is simple. God's powerful presence will come upon Mary and make this baby happen. In the words of our text, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 35a). Now this isn't Gabriel's way of saying to Mary, "May the Force be with you." The Holy Spirit isn't an impersonal energy field that creates and binds all things together, an invisible power that Christian disciples, like brave Jedi, can harness on the side of the good. No, the Spirit is the personal presence of God, coming to accomplish his saving purposes in the world.

When we think of the Holy Spirit, we often associate the Spirit with the early church's experience at Pentecost, when the power of God came upon the followers of Jesus to energize them and propel them into their mission of spreading the gospel. But the Holy Spirit isn't just an early church thing, or just a New Testament thing. It's a whole Bible thing. In the opening chapter of Genesis, we're told that the Spirit of God moved across the

waters. We're told that God spoke and brought things into existence. So it's through the Spirit that God does the work of creating. It's through the powerful work of the Spirit that the world has its beginning.

And here in the opening chapter of Luke, we're told that through Jesus, the God who was making the world in the beginning is now acting again for the salvation of his people and a new creation. The world is so broken, and humankind so lost and disobedient, that God is now doing creation all over again, treating us with forgiveness and working to make us new. So we shouldn't be surprised that as God keeps his promises and makes a new beginning, the Holy Spirit is in the picture.

Think of the Holy Spirit as *the* Christmas Spirit (capital S). Not the Christmas spirit that we usually seek, hope for, or experience this time of the year, though that certainly has its good points. Rather, I'm talking about the Spirit who is God's way of coming into our lives to create, to make us new, to make the world new. And when that happens, there will be interruption, and disruption, and disturbance of the things we may have in mind, the patterns we have settled into, and the things we may have planned. As writer Mark Galli has put it, "When the Holy Spirit starts hovering, watch your back. Yes, the Spirit comes to assure us that our sins are forgiven (peace!) and that we are joined to Christ (love!) and that we have a blessed future with God our Father (hope!). But if the Spirit has started a new work in our lives—whether we call it a new creation or a new birth—we can be sure we'll know holy chaos."<sup>1</sup>

One of the reasons the Christmas story appeals to us and engages us is because of the characters we encounter in the narrative. Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, angels, Herod, the magi, and so on. We even insert others like the innkeeper or the animals. But in our fascination with all of these figures, we often overlook and neglect the key participant in the drama, the Holy Spirit. In the first two chapters of his Gospel, Luke tells us about how the Spirit comes to and engages with John the Baptist (1:15), Mary (1:35), Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67), and Simeon (2:25-26). And soon we'll hear more about the Spirit's descent upon Jesus himself, at his baptism (4:18).

So today, as we continue our worship and our children come to lead us further into the Christmas story, join me in praying that the life-giving, life-changing Holy Spirit will come upon us, and make us participants in the Christmas drama, so each of us can find our place in the story of salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Galli, "Peace and Good Will? 'Bah, Humbug,' Says the Holy Spirit." ChristianityTodayLibrary. November 22, 2013. Accessed December 23, 2013 <<http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2013/december/tidings-of-chaos-and-joy.html>>.