

SERMON: *Catch the Spirit!*

Text: Acts 19:1-7

Purpose: the purpose of this sermon is to introduce and encounter the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

- I. Who is the Holy Spirit?**
 - A. Confusion Regarding the Holy Spirit**
 - B. Breath of (God's) Life: *Ru-ah***
 - C. God Sent Jesus. Jesus Sent Holy Spirit.**
 - D. Fullness (Baptism) of the Holy Spirit (Rebirth/John 3)**
- II. Welcome the Holy Spirit**
 - A. Ephesus Christians (Acts 19)**
 - B. Baptism (Human Witness)/Laying on of Hands (Divine Witness)**
 - C. Max Lucado – Fishing/dynamite Illustration**
 - D. *Pass It On Piece***

Response to the Word: Prayer of Encounter

Like many of their generation, my kids were captivated by the Harry Potter books. One of the lesser known characters was a Hogwarts history professor named Cuthbert Binns. His lectures were as engaging as the drone of a vacuum cleaner, and his students slept through most of his classes. By the time Harry took his class, he was a ghost. It was said that his lectures were on ‘auto-pilot,’ and that one day he woke up in the staff lounge to go to class and never noticed that he left his body behind. He had died, but his spirit went on with business as usual.

What, precisely, is the spirit? The Bible speaks of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Ghost in the King James. It also makes reference to the human spirit, as in Ecclesiastes 12:7, for example, “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” In his play *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder observed through the narration of the Stage Manager, “We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars...everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings.”

My wife and her father had a very strong bond between them. I, too, felt a close kinship with him. One Christmas, after Jude and I had been married for a couple of years, Dad gave me a pocket watch that he had received from his grandfather who worked on the railroads. In the note that came with it, he wrote, “Steve, this watch belonged to my grandfather. I want you to have it, because you are more like a son to me than a son-in-law.” During the last years of his life, Dad Downing had dementia. We lost him bit by bit,

and found ourselves guardian of his memories and biography. On the day he died, we were gathered around his bed with a hospice nurse. After several hours, Jude suddenly stood and said, “Steve, you need to pray with Dad now.”

I took his hand and prayed, “God, thank you for Dad, for all he has taught us and for the love that we share. Help him to know that we will be ok. Help him to let go so that he may rest with the glorious company of the saints of light.” I got no further in the prayer, for in that moment, he did, in fact, let go, and his spirit left him. One moment, he was with us; the next, he was gone.

“That was amazing!” the Hospice nurse said with tears of wonder, “I’ve never actually seen a spirit take flight before!” My wife saw it, too, and we knew Dad was at peace.

“Well,’ I can hear someone saying, “that may be comforting, but it doesn’t really explain what a spirit is, does it?” Even our language clouds our understanding. God’s Spirit is sometimes referred to as a ‘him’ and other times an ‘it.’ The latter dispels the notion that God’s Spirit has a masculine gender, but it doesn’t convey the personal nuance that God’s Spirit comforts, guides, teaches or convicts one of sin.

If we had plenty of time, several hours or more, we could read through parts of the Bible and list all the attributes and characteristics of the Holy Spirit on paper. It could be a fascinating study. No doubt we would learn a lot. But there is one thing we would not learn: who the Holy Spirit is.

To know the Spirit of God, we must *encounter* the Spirit of God. This is what Jesus meant when he counseled Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying that you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” A true understanding comes from abiding in God’s Spirit.

Unlike the Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, the Hebrew word, *ruach*, is much less precise and more elastic. Its range of meaning includes: spirit, breath, wind, fire and vigor. When God in Genesis 2 breathes into Adam the breath of life and he begins to live, he (and by theological extension all the rest of us, too) have received a measure of God’s eternal spirit. We are animated by no one less than the Spirit of God! That is what Ecclesiastes refers to when it speaks of the dust (body) returning to the earth, while the spirit returns to ‘God who gave it.’ In this sense, the Spirit of God ‘hovering over the face of the waters’ in Genesis 1 has been with us all along.

What, then, does John the Baptist mean when he says, “I baptize with water, but he (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire?” And what does Jesus mean when he tells Nicodemus, “You must be born from above?” And again, when the disciples are gathered to witness the ascension of Jesus, what does Jesus mean when he encourages them, “But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth?”

They mean, of course, that redemption is not just for the body, but for the whole person, spirit, soul and body. As God sent Jesus, the Word made flesh; Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, the divine witness in human life! The baptism of the Holy Spirit, or fullness of the Holy Spirit, is a gift of God that bubbles over in worship and witness. It cannot be contained! The disciples who were filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost exploded with the witness of Christ! They spoke in unknown languages, healed the lame, preached the gospel, raised the dead and championed Christ even in the face of death.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is an empowerment. A release of the gifts of the Spirit. An enabling, to truly love others and the ability to grow in this. When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, our life begins to be significantly transformed. We enter into a daily relationship with the Spirit of God. We begin to hear God’s voice within and find strength to respond...

...Which brings us to our text. In Acts 19, the Apostle Paul arrives at Ephesus in Asia Minor on his third missionary journey. He stopped there briefly on his second missionary journey, and promised to return. When he arrives, he learns that the Ephesian believers have an incomplete understanding of Christian teaching. When Paul asks, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” the believers of Ephesus reply, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

What they understood was not necessarily wrong or incorrect; they simply did not know the full story of God’s grace. Quite likely, they had been led to faith through the ministry of Apollos who, according to Luke, had to be taken by Priscilla and Aquilla and informed of events subsequent to his departure from Palestine. Though they had received a baptism of repentance, they had not received the baptism by fire that Jesus was to give.

Paul does not preach, debate or belittle. He simply baptizes them by water in the name of Jesus, places his hands upon them and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They speak with tongues and prophesy. God refuses to be stuffed in a box. The wave of God’s Spirit flows where and how it will, with miraculous effect. I love the story Max Lucado relates in his book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* to describe this.

A game warden once noticed that a particular fisherman named Sam consistently caught more fish than anyone else. Most came in from the lake with one or two fish, but Sam always had a boat full. The warden asked Sam for his secret, and Sam responded by inviting the warden on the next fishing trip to observe.

Next morning, the two rowed to the middle of the lake. The warden watched to see what Sam would do. Sam took out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and threw it into the air. The explosion rocked the lake with such force that dead fish began to surface; Sam then gathered them into the boat with a net. The warden was shocked and speechless. When he recovered, he began to yell at Sam. “I’ll put you away for this, buddy!”

At that moment, Sam lit another stick of dynamite and tossed it into the warden’s lap. “Are you going to sit there all day complaining,” he asked, “or are you going to fish?” The warden faced a decision—fish or be fished. In a flash, he was yanked from observer to participant.

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people,” a Rabbi once remarked to some experienced fishermen. They followed, but, quite frankly, did not appear to be quick learners. “Oh you of little faith,” Jesus would say to them. They observed the miracles, but were not part of the miracles themselves. In fairness, Peter once dared to set foot in the stormy sea, but his faith wavered and Jesus had to perform spiritual CPR.

All of this changed when the disciples suddenly discovered a stick of dynamite in their hands. “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen!” The gospel was too powerful to contain. If the disciples did not explode with the telling of it, they would be consumed by it. They HAD to jump into action when the Holy Spirit came upon them! They had to start fishing, and fish they did. Over 2,000 people answered Peter’s summons to faith on the day of Pentecost.

Max Lucado continues, “Their message of the Nazarene dominoed across the civilized world. They were an infectious fever, a moving organism. They refused to be stopped. Uneducated drifters who shook history like one might shake a rug.”

So what can happen today when God’s Spirit takes residence in a human heart? How can we catch the wave of God’s Spirit? Please bear with me as I close with a snapshot from my 13th year at church camp...

It was the final night of a week at camp. My cabin-mates and I sat around the campfire with all the other campers and counselors. This was the big event they spoke of. Better than ‘capturing the flag’, archery or swimming. Better than hikes in the woods, canoeing on the

lake and camping overnight in a forest. “It only takes a spark to get a fire going...” I listened to the tangle of voices and thought of the spark that ignited my own spiritual fire. I knew God held me “in his hands” and that “Jesus loved me”, but the Holy Spirit remained a mystery. Whenever I heard of the Holy Ghost, all I could think of was Charlie Brown in his Halloween costume.

I stabbed another marshmallow and held it near the embers. One of the counselors was praying, “God, send your Spirit to the kids around this fire...” I had grown up with a ‘safe’ religion. Private prayers. Golden Rule. Duty to God and country. But somewhere Jesus asked me to follow him. My religion no longer knew safety. I relaxed my grip and let God challenge my comfort, shape my convictions and burn away spiritual pretense. God’s Spirit kindled my faith and fashioned my flashy forgery into an honest ember.

Someone was telling about their close encounter with God. I felt a rush of adrenaline. My story would need to be told, if I could be so bold. Grateful for the fire, a magnet of fixed attention, I spoke the words of my heart. A youth, silent as stone, found voice to tell of God’s love, and felt the Spirit of God descending from above.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NRSV)

Pass it on...