

June 9, 2019

“An Unseen Power”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 2:1-4, 12-15; Galatians 5:16-17, 19-23

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This week I'll be going to the New England Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. One of the resolutions we will be discussing and taking up for a vote, as hard as it is to believe, is the following: *Whereas the conference has seen declining church attendance, and whereas the Cabinet has determined this is due to the complex nature of the God we worship and the inability of pastors to communicate it properly, be it therefore resolved to implement all the necessary steps to make church going more straightforward and user-friendly, beginning immediately by phasing out the third person of the Holy Trinity. Henceforth, the Holy Spirit will be relieved of all duties and responsibilities. The Father and the Son will now be referred to as the Holy Duo.*” (Pause)

Just kidding! Obviously, this isn't going to happen, but it serves to point out the mystery surrounding the nature of the Holy Spirit, and the difficulty we have in trying to understand just what role the Holy Spirit has in our lives. In today's Scripture from the Book of Acts, we heard the Holy Spirit described as the sounds of a mighty windstorm, with tongues of fire that suddenly appeared, settling on each of the disciples. Jesus himself described the Holy Spirit like a mysterious wind: you do not see the wind, you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. But, you hear the sound of it, feel the touch of it, see the effects of it. American philosopher and naturalist Loren Eiseley touched on this when he wrote, “You do not know the power of the wind until you get into some high upland place where it is always blowing. Then you see the shining reflection of stones on which no moss can secure a foothold. The rocks have lain there for ages while the wind has passed over them; and like pebbles in a stream, they become smooth and polished by the mere passage of the unseen wind. Pick them up and turn them over and the underside still has the rough crusty texture of the original stone. But the exposed side is a testimony to an unseen power.” An unseen power.

And that is like the power of the Holy Spirit. It's unseen, but transforming! Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. So let's go to that upper room in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. You may not know this, but Pentecost was actually a Jewish holiday. It was a Festival to celebrate the wheat harvest, and Jews were pouring into the city from all over. Author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “They have to come. It's one of three obligatory feast days of the year. And so they arrive. Medes and Elamites from the east; Romans from the west; Libyans from the south; and Cappadocians from the north – all of them streaming into the city and setting up their own camps, so

that walking through the crowded city is like taking a trip around the world, with Arabic singing over here, and Libyan laughter over there and, wafting over it all, the smell of Egyptian food cooking over an open fire. There's only one group missing," says Taylor. "A small band of orphaned disciples. They are not walking the streets at all but are huddled together behind locked doors out of fear of their enemies. (A few days before Jesus ascended to heaven, and they were left seemingly on their own.) For all practical purposes, they and their movement are dead – leaderless, powerless, visionless. The world has become a frightening place for them and they have barricaded themselves against it, believing that their own safety lay in sticking together, locking their doors, and keeping everyone else out."

Until... until the wind and fire and power of the Holy Spirit came rushing in like a gale force, igniting and empowering the disciples to such an extent that they poured out of that upper room oblivious to any danger. They were excited, joyful, confident. All talking at once and even in different languages. Celebrating loudly. How do we know? Because people from a distance, "heard their sounds and came running." A crowd gathered watching them, asking "what's going on?" and even joking, some saying, "They must be drunk." But no, they were not filled with drink; they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were filled with the power of God. And that power changed them, transformed them, and enabled them to go out and change the entire course of history.

And we see this again and again throughout the Bible, how the Holy Spirit transforms lives and things that affect us. Let's go to the Old Testament – to the very first book of Genesis, Chapter 1, vs. 1& 2. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the 'Spirit' of God was moving over the surface of the waters." There is the Spirit transforming the earth. The 'Spirit of God' in the very second sentence of the Bible. And that's only the beginning. Several times in the Old Testament the Spirit of God came upon certain people to empower them to do extraordinary things. David for instance. The Bible tells us, "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David." And David killed the giant Goliath and became king of Israel. The many prophets in the Bible spoke with wisdom and truth, envisioning the future because the "Spirit of the Lord was upon them." Then, in the New Testament, Luke tells us that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit "while yet in his mother's womb." Jesus was conceived because as the angel told Mary, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you." When Jesus was baptized, we're told, "the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove." And we all know the power that gave him for teaching, healing, performing miracles." Paul spoke often of the power of the Spirit as giving gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith and more. As you can see, throughout the Bible, the identity

and power of the Holy Spirit is that of God. And it is a power available to us as well. A power that can change us and enable us to go out and make a difference in this world.

So now the obvious question is, or should be, how do you and I get that power of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Well, let me share with you something that never fails. It's both a prayer and it's also a way of praying – of intentionally opening ourselves up to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And it's simple. Open up your hands like this, relax, and pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, come." Let's do it together, "Come, Holy Spirit, com." Let's do it again, "Come, Holy Spirit, come." One more time, "Come, Holy Spirit, come." (PAUSE) Can you feel the Spirit filling you?

And I can assure you that if you pray this way, and let the Spirit fill you, it will change you. How will you know? By the fruits you will bear. Let's go back to St. Paul's letter to the Galatians we heard today. He talks about our natural self. Our natural self and the desires of the flesh, and how opposed they are to what the Spirit wants us to be. He says the results of following the those desires of the flesh, our natural selves, are obvious. I'm going to read them slowly so you can reflect on them and how they might be negatively influencing your life: impurity... lust... idolatry... hostility... quarreling... jealousy... outbursts of anger... selfishness... dissension... envy... drunkenness... things like these. You know the ones that affected you. Now in contrast, the fruit of the Spirit are things like love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Don't they sound so much better? Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Maybe it's time for little levity. Some of you may have heard this, but it seems God recently looked around the earth and became concerned that too many people were not bearing the fruit of his Spirit. So he sent some angels to investigate. And sure enough, they came back with a rather sobering report. "Yes, it's bad," they said. "Only five percent of humans are fruitful. Ninety-five percent are fruitless." So God thought about it and decided to send an email to the five percent who were fruitful, to encourage them further in doing good, hoping they might increase their efforts and get this world back on track. And do you know what the email said? Do you? No?... So, I see you didn't get the email either!!

Yes, it's easy to lose our way in today's world. And that's why we need the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. So we can bear good fruit and make a difference. And, because bearing good fruit has eternal consequences. So once again pray with me... "Come Holy Spirit come." "Come, Holy Spirit come." Amen.