

Date: December 13, 2020 (Advent 3)

1. Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8.
2. Subject: the Holy Spirit.
3. Topic: Spirit-guided living as fulfillment.
4. Aim: encourage.
5. Proposition: "Recipients of the Spirit live for spiritual transformation and growth."

## LIVING IN THE SPIRIT

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," wrote the author of Isaiah, some time after the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem. Jesus would later quote this same passage, applying it to himself about 600 years after it was written.

In addition to that, we are privileged to witness the outpouring of the Spirit on Jesus in his baptism. The Church universal experienced the outpouring on that Pentecost Day as recorded in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul wrote pages and pages about the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

So here's a fact: the disciple of Christ is the recipient of the Spirit of God.

Over the centuries the Church has made this a lot more complicated than the experiences of Isaiah, Jesus and Paul seem to have been. They just experienced it. Isaiah and Jesus simply proclaimed it. Paul tried to find ways to reflect on it. But the experience was clear, fundamental and life-changing. The experience itself was assumed to be genuine and transformative. What one did about the experience needed some conversation, but the experience was real prior to any discussion of it.

Over the centuries, the Church has worked hard to comprehend the experience and even to regulate it. That seems contrary to the work of the Spirit, but it is what an institution can do and frequently feels it must do. Let's cope with these complications quickly, so we can move on to the real message for today.

Within the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" there are two primary channels for the Spirit's movement into our lives. The first is baptism and the second is spontaneous intervention.

So, as Jesus' indwelling occurred in the course of his baptism, so can ours. The candidate is baptized by God and this miracle opens the heart of the candidate so that the Spirit may enter. Since baptism is a miracle performed by God, the age or comprehension of the candidate is irrelevant. God moves into the life of the candidate through baptism.

The second channel is a spontaneous action of the Spirit. In this, the individual becomes open to the miraculous intervention of God and through that openness, invites the Spirit into his or her life. This happened quite obviously in the Acts of the Apostles<sup>1</sup> and continues to happen today.

Of course, those disciples who experienced the Spirit before being baptized are then baptized. The Spirit-guided life and baptism are always linked.

It is also clear that the action by which the Spirit enters our lives is not a one-time, isolated event. That is, while the initial miracle created by God does not need to be repeated, the disciple certainly has to continuously develop his or her life in the Spirit. Being guided by the Spirit is a process of growth and development. So, whether the Spirit entered your life through infant baptism or through an adult conversion experience at a crusade, living a transformed life is a process in which the disciple learns ever greater reliance on the Spirit and opens ever deeper areas of living to the Spirit's influence.

So, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul and the Church all assume that disciples will be inhabited by the Spirit of God. This occurs variously through baptism and through the spontaneous action of the Spirit. However the disciple begins this transformed life, he or she must be continually renewed in the Spirit.

Let's assume that everyone listening to or reading this sermon is already a recipient of the Spirit, whether through baptism or spontaneous intervention. You see, those who are still with me at this point in the sermon must be disciples of Christ—an inquirer is unlikely to be able to hold out this long.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 10.

Therefore, we can also assume that everyone listening to or reading this sermon is not only in need of that continuous process of renewal, but actually desires it.

There is a barrier to this process. Let's call it "spiritual complacency." This is the assumption that everyone is basically ok where they are spiritually speaking. After all, God is love and has forgiven us our sins. So, yeah, I'm ok, you're ok. We're fine as we are. That's spiritual complacency.

Spiritual complacency is contrary to the testimony of New Testament. "I'm ok, you're ok" is not Christian. The consistent witness of the Bible and the Church is that human beings need the intervention of God. We cannot do life on our own. We cannot gain access to eternity on our own. This is part of the good news. Here's why.

The fact that we can't achieve salvation on our own means that we don't have to try. We can give up all the striving to earn God's love. There is no value to working harder and so we don't have to. That's good news.

The opposite of spiritual complacency is spiritual transformation and growth. As individual disciples and as the Body of Christ we are to mold ourselves according to the model and pattern of Jesus. We match our lives to his life.

In broad terms that will look like the embodiment of God's righteousness and compassion. Others are to experience God's presence, grace, forgiveness and love in and through us. The more accurately we reflect Jesus, the more we will grow in the Spirit.

Not only that, but the more accurately we reflect Jesus, the more joy we will bring to the heart of God and the closer to our own purpose we will come. Think of that! By being Christ's hands, feet and voice on this earth, we bring joy to God. AND we become more what God intended us to be. We find personal fulfillment as individuals and as the community of the faith as we embody Jesus.

How awesome is that for ourselves, for our congregation and for our world. Our spiritual transformation, growth and renewal empower us to be the hands, feet and voice of God in our world. The more accurately we reflect Jesus to our world, the more God will bless the world through us.

So, now we know why we study the Bible. We are not looking to master its content. It is not hugely important whether the “whore of Babylon” in the Book of the Revelation represents ancient Rome or some yet-to-be experienced government. It doesn’t really matter if Jesus healed the boy of epilepsy or cast out an evil spirit. What matters is this: what is the character of God being revealed to me and how will I shape my life according to God’s character? Whenever you study the Bible, ask yourself,

1. Who is this God who is being revealed in this passage?
2. Who is God challenging me to become and to do?
3. What one concrete step could I take today to become more of who God wants me to be?

This easy to follow process can actually guide and inform our spiritual transformation and growth. In fact, this process actually incorporates the themes of the season of Advent in which we find ourselves. Advent is all about preparing ourselves for the second coming of the Christ, which we can do as we take on the character of Christ. Advent challenges us to mold ourselves according to the compassion, justice, righteousness, forgiveness and love of God. By answering for ourselves,

- a. Who is God showing himself to be?
- b. Who is God asking me to become and what is he asking me to do?
- c. What one thing could I do today to become that person?

we are celebrating Advent as it should be celebrated.

This three step process gives a concrete means to live out in our daily lives what Isaiah wrote centuries before Jesus was born—“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” For the Spirit of God is upon us, calling us to be the embodiment of Christ in and for our world.

AMEN.