

**Life in the Spirit****Acts 2:1-11 & St. John 14:15-31**

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We began the Church Year back in November, recalling the words of comfort that God spoke to his people through the prophets. And we began the Church Year singing those familiar words, “O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.” The season of Advent cries out with expectation and hope. We have a problem. God calls, but we can’t hear. God speaks, and we don’t understand. Since the days of Abraham, he tells us: “Walk before me and be blameless”, but no matter how hard we try, we wander from him and we stumble into sin. God created us for something better. He created us to have and to grow into perfect fellowship with him, but along the way we rebelled, we gave him up in favour of sin and our own wills. And so we hear God’s promise of redemption and we cry out, “O come, O come Emmanuel”. Sin has captured us. Lord, ransom us—come and set us free!

And so over the course of the last half-year we’ve celebrated the answer to our prayer. At Christmas Emanuel came. At Christmas we celebrated the coming of the Messiah. At Epiphany we celebrated his manifestation to the Gentiles; he came not only to ransom captive Israel, but to ransom all of captive humanity. During Holy Week we sat with him in the upper room as he turned that last Passover meal, that last Old Testament sacrament, into the first

sacrament of his New Covenant. We prayed with him in Gethsemane and followed as the soldiers took him away to be tried and crucified. We were there on Good Friday as he gave his life for ours and we celebrated on Easter Sunday, recalling his resurrection. He conquered sin and death and in his resurrection he has given us the promise of our own future resurrection. And then on Ascension we listened as he gave the promise of his Spirit—the Helper who would come alongside us. And yet we read too Jesus’ words of promise to his disciples: “I’m not through yet. I’m going to my Father so that I can send you the Holy Spirit. Go back to Jerusalem; wait and pray there until he comes. He will empower you to do everything I’ve told you.” Pentecost is the final scene in the act. Sometimes we forget about it. We focus on the events of Holy Week and of Easter—we focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus—and we forget about Ascension and Pentecost. We forget Jesus’ *heavenly* ministry. Our great high priest has entered the Father’s presence where he presents himself as a sacrifice for our sins. And Jesus, our brother, sits too at his Father’s right hand. He came and established his kingdom, then he ascended to heaven where he rules over it. And to give birth to his kingdom and to empower it, he sent the Spirit. Without the heavenly session of Jesus and without the sending of the Holy Spirit the Gospel isn’t complete. Without them Jesus did everything necessary to restore us to God, but none of it would have been put into action, none of it would have been applies to us.

Again, knowing our lost state, we sang: “O come, O come Emanuel.”

Emanuel means “God with us”. Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation—of the eternal Word of God who took our human nature on himself as he was born of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we were lost to sin, God spoke his Word, but we could no longer hear it; we could no longer understand it. So the Word *himself* came. He spoke again, but this time he spoke as one of us. And he offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He paved the way for our restoration to God’s fellowship. And yet his disciples, even after spending three years hearing him teach and even after his resurrection from the dead, didn’t understand. “God with us” was important, but we still needed more. The highway was paved, but the disciples still weren’t walking it. That’s why we need the Holy Spirit. If Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is “God *with* us”, the Holy Spirit is “God *in* us” turning our hearts to God, renovating our souls, unstopping our ears, and giving us understanding so that we can know and follow the Word. Jesus paved the highway that leads us back to the Father, but it’s the Holy Spirit who sets our feet on that highway and sets us walking toward the Father.

In our Gospel Jesus promised:

I will *not* leave you as orphans; I *will* come to you.

And a few verses later, in verse 25 and 26, he says:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Through Jesus, the Father will send “the Helper”—literally, the “one who comes alongside”—who is the Holy Spirit. And Jesus says that it’s the Spirit who will teach us. Jesus spent three years teaching. It was also Jesus who rescued us from sin by becoming human, by offering himself as a sacrifice at the cross, and in destroying death by his resurrection. But it’s the Spirit who will make sense of Jesus’ ministry for us. Think of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus. Throughout his three years of ministry they heard what he said, but they didn’t understand. Even at the end, in the upper room as Jesus showed that he had come to be the servant of his own creation, the disciples were fighting over who was the greatest. Despite Jesus having told them that he would rise from the grave in three days, the disciples hid in fear during those three days. When they found the empty tomb their first thought was that someone had stolen his body. Even when Thomas saw him, he doubted that it was truly Jesus. The disciples saw everything Jesus did; they heard everything he taught; but they didn’t understand. They didn’t understand, that is, *until Pentecost*.

We read in our Epistle how they were gathered in that same upper room, waiting and praying, when the Holy Spirit came as Jesus had promised. He came with the sound of a rushing wind and as tongues of fire descending on the disciples gathered there. And it was then, as the Spirit “came alongside” that everything “clicked” for them. We see it in Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter seems to have been the one who was most lost when it came to all these things. He truly loved

Jesus; he truly wanted to follow Jesus. He was the one who stepped out of the boat and, in faith, walked on water. But he was also the one who, just after Jesus had preached about his own servanthood, drew his sword and cut off the ear of one of the chief priest’s soldiers. But as the Spirit descended on Peter, suddenly it all made sense; it “clicked”. And Peter preached his first sermon, proclaiming the Gospel message. Suddenly he understood all the Old Testament prophecies that pointed to Jesus and suddenly he understood what Jesus had accomplished in becoming one of us and in his death and resurrection. Thousands heard him preach that message and thousands received it, taking hold of Jesus by faith through baptism. Peter shows us what the Spirit does: “He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

Before the Spirit came, God called, but we couldn’t hear. Before the Spirit came, God spoke, but we didn’t understand. Before the Spirit came, God said: “Walk before me and be blameless”, but that command was only a source of frustration for us. But now that the Spirit has come, God calls and the Spirit opens our ears; God speaks, and the Spirit gives us understanding; God commands: “Walk before me and be blameless” and the Holy Spirit sanctifies our hearts and gives us a desire both to be in fellowship with God and to walk before him in righteousness. What you and I rejected in our sinful rebellion, the Holy Spirit restores. Through sin we defaced the image and likeness of God that we were created with, but through the Holy Spirit God

cleans and restores and makes whole what we defaced.

John the Baptist pointed to all this as he heralded Jesus. He called the people to repentance in preparation for Jesus. He offered the people a symbolic washing with water, but the whole time John was telling the people that Jesus had something better to offer. He said:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

(Matthew 3:11)

The people needed more than repentance. That was only the first step. They needed the baptism that Jesus offers: a baptism not of repentance only, but a baptism of forgiveness and a baptism with the Holy Spirit. In that we see the two-fold significance of Baptism. Throughout the Old Testament baptism was used to purify things (and people) that were unclean or to set them aside for holy use. It’s no wonder that in establishing Baptism as the entrance to the New Covenant, Jesus would use this symbol of washing. He died in our place and as we receive his offer of new life in faith through Baptism, he washes away our sin. But as we see today, there’s more to the Gospel than forgiveness; there’s restoration, there’s making whole, there’s new life. That happens as the Holy Spirit is poured into us. Baptism washes, but it also fills. When the men gathered on Pentecost heard Peter’s sermon they cried out, “What shall we do?” And Peter told them:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

We see this dramatically played out in Ephesus. When Paul first arrived there he noticed something was missing. That something was the Holy Spirit. The people there had *part* of the message, but not the whole message. They had heard John's message of repentance and had received his baptism, but they'd never heard of the Holy Spirit. They were still living in *expectation* of the Messiah. They had repentance, but they were missing the Gospel. And so Paul preached Jesus Christ to them, they believed, in faith they were baptised into Jesus, and as a result they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Believe and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And St. Paul tells us that it's that Spirit that turns our hearts. The Corinthians were looking to physical signs as evidence of the Holy Spirit. Paul warned them not to do that. Before he talks about the gifts that the Spirit gives for ministry, he reminds them: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Jesus is the Lord of creation. In our rebellion we rejected his lordship. The first work of the Holy Spirit in us is to change our rebellious hearts. The first and greatest sign of the Spirit's work in a life is when that man or woman sets aside human pride and acknowledges the lordship of Jesus.

Paul also describes the transformation that the Holy Spirit brings to our lives. In Galatians 5 he writes:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:16, 19-24)

The works of the flesh that Paul describes are all the result of our rebellion, but when the Spirit is poured into us, he turns our hearts back to God. He's the conduit of God's grace. The Spirit makes us alive to God's call to walk before him and to be blameless; he gives us a desire for holiness and he gives us the ability to be holy.

Think of Jesus' description of himself as the living vine. He says:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

Apart from Jesus, you and I dead wood. It's only as we're grafted into the living vine—into Jesus—that his life courses through us. His life gives us life and as he brings us back to life he makes us fruitful—we start bearing the same kind of fruit that he bears. But ultimately this is the Holy Spirit's work. He's the one who grafts us into Jesus. Because he and Jesus are one, as we partake of the life of the Spirit, we partake of the life of Jesus. And because the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the gift of faith, it's only through the faith the Spirit gives that we partake of Jesus as we receive the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. The Holy Spirit indwells us and as he indwells us he unites us to Jesus—to the eternal Word of God who gives life.

But the Holy Spirit's ministry doesn't end with us individuals. Earlier I had the children gathered at the font. I poured the water over their hands to illustrate the washing effect of Baptism and then I had them all cup their hands as I poured the water into them to illustrate the Holy Spirit's filling effect. But remember what they did then. With those wet hands they all took hold of each other as a reminder that in our Baptism the Holy Spirit unites us to each other and creates the Church, the Body of Christ. There's only one Jesus—only one vine—and only one Spirit, who unites us to that vine. The Holy Spirit takes complete strangers and makes us brothers and sisters in Jesus. As St. Paul tells us in Ephesians:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your

call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

One Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism, and one Body. And that oneness underscores the work that the Spirit does in us to restore what we gave up in our rebellion. Think back to the story in Genesis of the tower of Babel. That story describes not only our rebellion against God, but it describes humanity's complete loss of the knowledge of God. It describes humanity sinking into paganism and it ended with God confusing the languages of the people and scattering them. Because of sin and a loss of the knowledge of God, what had been one was fractured into many. But at Pentecost what our sin fractured, the Spirit brought back together. The babble of Babel was undone as the Spirit broke out in the gift of tongues and people from all over the world understood the Gospel and the mighty works of God preached in their own languages. The Spirit called to them and brought them together, uniting them: one Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism, one Body.

As we gather together each week, let us remember the work that the Spirit has done in us. As we pass through the doors of the church and as we pass by the baptismal font, remember that we have each been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. God calls, and because the Holy Spirit indwells us we hear him. God speaks, and because the Holy Spirit indwells us we understand. God calls us to walk before him and to be blameless, and because the Holy Spirit indwells us we now walk before him in righteousness. But never forget that we do all this

together, that we do all this as the Body of Christ. On the doors of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Ravenna, Italy are these words of St. Paul:

“Extinguish not the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and anger, and indignation and clamour, and blasphemy be put away from you, along with all malice (Ephesians 4:30ff). Be you filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).”¹

Brothers and sisters, those are good words to remember as we gather. The Holy Spirit has made us a temple for himself. Let us live our lives in that knowledge. Let us welcome the grace he gives. Let us welcome him as the guest of our souls and as the God who makes us one in Christ Jesus. And let us not simply welcome him, each into his or her own life, but let us welcome the gift of the Spirit in the lives of our brothers and sisters. Let us share his gifts as we work together to build his Church and his kingdom and let us manifest and live his fruit. And of that Spiritual fruit, let us remember that love is the greatest. The Spirit pours it into us. Let it overflow from us that the world might see it. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were given a manifestation of the gift of tongues that the world might see Jesus at work. Today we have a similar manifestation in the gift of love. Father Parsch gives this exhortation: “We...have a gift of tongues which all men can understand. It is the gift of love

infused into us by the Holy Spirit. Love unites, love is a common language, by means of love we can speak to all nations.”²

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks and praise for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to be “God with us” and for sending your Spirit to be “God in us”, applying the redeeming work of Jesus in our lives. By your Holy Spirit, fill us with your grace and make us faithful to build up your body with the gifts he gives and to bear the fruit of love in our lives that the world might see you as it looks at us. We ask this through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

¹ Pius Parsch, *Sermons on the Liturgy*, trans. Philip T. Weller (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1953), p. 195.

² Pius Parsch, *The Church's Year of Grace* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1954), vol. 3, p. 215.