

First Fruits

Someone pointed out to me the other day that in Japanese popculture radiation tends to create large destructive monsters, while in America radiation creates superheroes?

It's almost as if some major event has occurred that gave our countries radically different attitudes about nuclear power...

In 1945, Japan was devastated by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the US. Japan soon surrendered, effectively ending WWII. The same event etched into the psyches of two different countries notions of terror and destruction on the one hand and victory and power on the other.

In Japan, the movie icon Godzilla perfectly symbolizes the fear of the devastating effects of nuclear radiation. In America, superheroes like Captain America personify the harnessed power of radiation to fight off Nazi bad guys.

This morning, we're going to be talking about a different sort of power that is both life-changing and often misunderstood - the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, God's Spirit gifted to God's people.

We have spent the last several months journeying through the Gospel of Mark, concluding with Jesus' death and resurrection. Last week, we jumped over to the Book of Acts to read about Jesus' subsequent ascension to the right hand of the Father to reign in glory.

This morning, we'll pick up where we left off after Jesus instructed the disciples to return to Jerusalem to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Join me this morning in Acts chapter 2.

READING

Acts 2:¹ *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.* ² *Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.* ³ *They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.* ⁴ *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

⁵ *Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.* ⁶ *When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.* ⁷ *Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?"* ⁸ *Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?* ⁹ *Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,* ¹⁰ *Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome* ¹¹ *(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"* ¹² *Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"*

¹³ *Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."*

With a crowd having gathered with curious interest, it seemed appropriate that someone should say something. Peter had always been the most bold of the disciples travelling with Jesus, so he stepped up to address the crowd.

Rather than read his whole speech, I figured I'd just summarize it for you here:

1. First, he'd obviously heard the joke about them being drunk, because he says "Nope! Not drunk. It's only like 9 in the morning guys."
 - a. We're not drunk - far from it. We're able to speak articulately in other languages and dialects because of God's Holy Spirit empowering us.
 - b. In fact, he says, the prophet Joel spoke of such a day when God's Spirit would be poured out on young and old alike so that people could hear God's message and be saved.
2. Peter goes on to tell the crowds about Jesus - all that he did and taught - and how he'd been killed by our own wicked men, but that He'd proven His victory over death through the resurrection and thus been glorified by the Father.
3. This was all prophesied, Peter mentions, by King David in the Psalms hundreds of years prior.
4. Jesus is the one David and all the Prophets had spoken of. And He is RISEN and EXALTED as LORD and MESSIAH.
5. Many were strongly convicted by Peter's message and wondered what they should do in response. They'd rejected this Jesus and yet they now had first-hand evidence that everything Peter said about him was true. Peter's message was simple: Repent of your unbelief, be baptized in Jesus' name, and receive the Holy Spirit.

Picking back up in verse 40...

⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."*⁴¹ *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* ⁴³ *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.* ⁴⁴ *All the believers were together and had everything in common.* ⁴⁵ *They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.* ⁴⁶ *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,* ⁴⁷ *praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

What a trip, huh? We've got loud violent winds, something like fiery tongues resting on people and making them speak languages they wouldn't know otherwise, and tons of people coming to know Jesus because of this one event. We're told that in the span of one day, the early church exploded in numbers from about 120 to 3,120.

More than numerical growth, this group of believers transformed from a bunch of uncertain and timid followers to bold, faithful, generous believers who gave up everything they had to worship, care for one another, and witness to others.

And all of this because of the Holy Spirit. I want to meditate this morning on the Holy Spirit, because it's the aspect of God's character in the Trinity that we tend to least understand.

In our church, as in many others, our teaching about the Holy Spirit can get short changed - perhaps sometimes because we're afraid of the implications of living freely with the power of God's Spirit within us.

It's simpler to just make following Jesus about following a set of rules or learning a bunch of information from scripture. But in Christ, through the Power of the Holy Spirit, we've been invited to a much more adventurous sort of life with God.

To understand that, let's take a closer look at this miracle of Pentecost.

I. LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT FULFILLS LAW & PROPHETS (14-39).

To begin to understand what happened here, we need to remember the Jewish roots of Christianity. Much of the significance of this miracle is lost on us because we fail to understand the beliefs and assumptions in the crowd itself that day.

The word "Pentecost" comes from the Greek translation of the "Fiftieth Day." For Jews living in Greek society, this was the Greek word they used to talk about their Holy Day called Shavuot.

Can you say "Sha - vu - oat" with me?

Leviticus 23 has this to say about the celebration of Shavuot, also known as the Feast of Weeks:

Leviticus 23:¹⁵ *"From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. ¹⁶ Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord.*

During Shavuot or Pentecost, the Jews remembered the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai which occurred 50 days after the original Exodus and Passover event (hence the 50 days). To celebrate, they give offerings from the first fruits of the wheat harvest in late spring.

The Law given to the Israelites also had a lot to say about how they were to treat immigrants and the poor in their midst - particularly because they'd just been rescued as slaves and

foreigners from Egypt. This is why the celebration of the Feast of Weeks specifically adds in verse 22:

Leviticus 23:²² *“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.”*

I share that little tidbit partially as a plug for our upcoming Bible Study series on the book of Ruth, where this bit about leaving gleanings for foreigners and needy in your midst will be especially important. Join us Wednesdays at 10am or 6:30pm to learn more!

But that’s also important because Ruth, who was a foreigner and a beneficiary of this law, was the ancestor of King David - remembered as the greatest King of Israel and a man after God’s own heart - who, coincidentally, Jewish tradition claims was both was born and died on the day of Shavuot.

Wow, Cory, you say. Thanks for that lesson on Jewish culture and history. But what does that have to do with THIS story of Pentecost, or with the Holy Spirit, or with us?

Well, I’m so glad you asked!

This is important because Jews from all over had gathered to Jerusalem

- to celebrate King David,
- and to remember God’s mercy for foreigners and the poor,
- and to celebrate the day that God’s presence had descended onto Mount Sinai with fire and intense winds and thunder.

And on THAT DAY. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to Jerusalem,

- Descending with a sound like roaring winds and something like tongues of fire,
- Enabling the disciples to speak in foreign tongues and dialects,
- And Inspiring Peter to proclaim the Gospel quoting prophecy from King David’s psalms

At Pentecost, Jesus Gave the Holy Spirit to the Church as a NEW LAW written upon our hearts.

1. In Jesus’ birth - God had tabernacled among us in a new way.
2. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, God completely transformed our ideas of passover and deliverance.
3. In Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit, God announced a new covenant to and through His people.

Everything God spoke in the Law and Prophets had been leading up to that point, and that gift of the Holy Spirit is what sustains us in hope for the next fulfillment of His promises in Jesus’ return.

LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT FULFILLS THE LAW & PROPHETS

But for whatever reason, many of us treat the Holy Spirit with suspicion or disinterest. We think of him like our conscience or as an interesting benefit should we choose to explore it.

Many of you know Lydia and I were shopping for a minivan recently. One of the things we were committed to in order to keep costs down is to turn down any of those offers for little add-ons that slowly drive up the final price tag on the vehicle - little conveniences they try to sell you on.

Understanding and living in the Power of the Holy Spirit isn't an optional add-on for our salvation. IT IS OUR SALVATION.

To not live in the power of the Holy Spirit once you've been saved would be like if we'd signed all the paperwork for our new van and then walked back home from the dealership and left it there.

The Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of every promise the Lord has made to be faithful even when we are not, to be near to us and restore His image within us.

To spurn the Holy Spirit is just nonsense.

II. LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT INVOLVES PATIENT ABIDING (1).

I think the next logical question for us, though, is what we have to do in order to receive the Holy Spirit?

And unfortunately, even though I think the scriptures are pretty clear, there are a lot of different ideas spread by different faith traditions out there that muddy the waters for us.

Some have claimed that you've only been truly baptized in the Holy Spirit, and thus you've only been truly saved, IF you display the gift of speaking in tongues like these first believers did.

But rest assured, the gift of tongues, in whatever form it may manifest, is only a possible result of the Holy Spirit - one that's given as an aide in worship or in witness. It's not a requirement to get the Holy Spirit - which is a good thing, because it's kinda hard to force yourself to speak a language you don't know.

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO is respond in faith to the Gospel of Jesus by submitting to the sign He has given us in water baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In doing so, we invite the Lordship of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which will express itself in various ways to equip us for worship and witness.

We don't accomplish any of that by our will or effort. It's purely a gift that we receive from God. That's not to say, however, that our choices don't make a difference.

I will say that our effectiveness in living in the power of the Holy Spirit is somewhat dependent upon our willingness to continue to abide regularly in God's presence through prayer, worship, study, and other habits.

None of these spiritual practices gain anything by our own effort. They simply help us to rest and position ourselves to receive from God.

LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT REQUIRES PATIENT ABIDING

When I was praying about that this week, I had a moment in prayer where I was asked by the Lord where I felt most at rest and at peace.

I had the answer immediately. It's when I'm sitting in my recliner with my little boy snuggled up on my chest for a nap. Just his gentle weight curled up on me, our breathing synced up as we drift off.

But as I reflected on that, I realized how short-lived those experiences are because, if you know my son, you know Deacon can't sit still that long. More often than not, he's bored after 30 seconds and wants to wiggle around or jump down and go dance or draw or play with blocks.

And just like that, I realized I do the same thing to God. So often as I settle in to rest with Him, I get distracted by the busyness of life and my expectations for other things I ought to be doing.

He graciously joins us in all our activity, but He longs to join us in rest so that we can do the right activities well.

When you really think about it, why would any of us expect to bear any of the fruits of the Spirit or to operate at all in the gifts of the Holy Spirit if we don't spend any time intentionally abiding with the Holy Spirit?

It's like never watering a plant and wondering why it's leaves are wilted and brown.

III. LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT RESULTS IN EMPOWERED WITNESS (1-13).

But FINALLY, let's talk about what living in the power of the Holy Spirit actually looks like in our lives.

If the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of God's promises for us and the outcome of our abiding with Him - what does that mean for us?

This is the really fun part.

When we DO focus ourselves upon God's presence and root ourselves in the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to accomplish God's purposes in the world - to worship God in spirit and truth and to witness to the world in power.

LIVING IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT RESULTS IN EMPOWERED MISSION

Living in the power of the Holy Spirit is like being a tree in blossom. We're rooted in Christ and watered by the Holy Spirit, and from those nutrients we produce fruit.

The Apostle Paul tells us that

***Galatians 5:**²² the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

These are fruits that every Christ-follower abiding in the Spirit should display. They draw us into intimate connection with God and they make us way more fun to hang around so that others are drawn to find out just what or who it is that made us this way.

Elsewhere Paul also talks about gifts of the Holy Spirit, also called grace gifts. These are special graces given to us that help us to glorify God through worship and witness in ways that are higher than anything we could have done naturally by our own effort.

For some, like these early believers, it may involve supernaturally speaking a language you did not know previously. For others, it may involve experiencing a new boldness to serve or a new level of wisdom or compassion to meet others in their need.

In recent decades, it's been popular in churches to take inventories to try and figure out what spiritual gifts you might have.

Similar to personality assessments like DISC or Myers-Briggs, these spiritual gift inventories can be helpful, but only because it gives you a tool to reflect on your own knowledge of your life in Christ.

The best way to examine your spiritual gifts is to learn about each of the gifts and invite others to reflect with you on the ways they see God moving in and through your life to witness to others or to worship God and lead others to worship Him better.

In other words, examine the fruit. What do you and others see being produced in your life that looks a lot like Jesus and less like something you could've done yourself?

When I was in youth ministry, I liked to describe spiritual gifts like being part of the X-Men. It's like we're all mutants with these special abilities that can be kinda scary or strange if we don't understand them. But once we do, they can be harnessed for enormous good in the world.

CONCLUSION

Now I'm back to talking about superheroes again, I guess.

But I suppose that's appropriate because in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, God has restored His image in us so that we can be more than just human.

You are not doomed to be fallen, sinful, shameful, and unworthy.

The sin that you feel so entangles you right now has lost its power in Christ's presence.

The despair and chaos that fills your life will not last.

For the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in you.

And THAT is good news.