

THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Happy Memorial Day! If you're in church today, chances are you're committed to your faith. Even if you are a frequent churchgoer, this is a popular weekend to take the day off—and the Christmas and Easter Christians aren't adding Memorial Day to the rotation anytime soon. People who show up today are committed, or at least are thinking about it. When it comes to commitment, the Memorial Day holiday itself is similar. For many of us, Memorial Day is mostly about grilling out and going to the pool for the first time; but if you have lost a loved one who was willing to die in service to their country, this weekend is about a much more significant observance; it's about remembering someone who made a commitment. So today seemed like a good day to talk about commitment. And I'm going to do so by sharing with you a story about the Holy Spirit.

Something I've noticed is that many Christians, particularly of the Presbyterian variety, don't quite know what to think about the Holy Spirit. I can see why; Jesus is easier to understand, a human being who had a body, taught life lessons and led by example. God is probably harder to wrap your mind around than Jesus—not having a human body. But the essential concept that God creates the world and rules over it is in at least some respects familiar; we have experience with people who create things and who care for them. The Holy Spirit is another matter. Some Christians, for instance Pentecostals or people who talk about speaking in tongues, are comfortable with talk about the Holy Spirit, but the rest of us are not so sure. And this is a challenge worth talking about, because according to what Jesus says in today's reading, once Jesus' life on earth is over, the activity of the Holy Spirit is how we come to know God. So, assuming that at least some of you committed people are here in church because you seek a closer relationship with God or Jesus, we'd better talk about the Holy Spirit.

Today's reading is part of the introduction to the Book of Acts. Acts is the book in the New Testament that tells the story of the church after the life of Jesus. The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and then the Book of Acts tells what happens next.

In this first chapter of Acts, the disciples are living in that short period of days following Easter when the risen Jesus is walking around on the earth. The disciples, who just

recently witnessed the death of Jesus, their Messiah, had fallen into hopelessness. They thought that the hope they found in Jesus had gone away...they now have their hope restored.

Out of this renewed sense of hope and courage, one of them asks Jesus a question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" It's a funny sounding question to our modern ears, but for the disciples, this was a practical question about their future and their wellbeing. They want to know who is going to be in charge now—who are they supposed to follow?

Many of you probably remember that each year in Advent, before Christmas, we talk about all of the expectations people had about the coming Messiah. They believed the Messiah would lead them in the face of their enemies and reign as a king in Israel. Well, it's now thirty-three years later, and this is the return to that conversation. Following the birth, life, and death of Jesus, political life is still largely the same in Jerusalem. The Romans run the government, the Jewish religious authorities hold their positions at the pleasure of the Romans, and the Jews live as an occupied people in their own homeland. Throughout Jesus ministry, many people hoped he would lead them out of this occupation, and then he died and that hope seemed lost. Now he's back, so again, they want to know when this will end and they see Jesus as their savior, so they ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

You may also remember from those Messiah texts we read before Christmastime that in Jesus, the people don't get what they were asking for. They get what they need, but not what they're asking for. They want a military leader to stage a coup and topple their Roman occupiers. Jesus does a number of things to challenge their authority, but he does it in other ways. He mocks their military parades when he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, reminding people that earthly power will pass away. He leads by serving and healing, reconciling people to one another rather than trying to defeat them. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple; his concern is justice and mercy for the poor. He gives the people something they can count on that will outlast the Roman Empire and in so doing his way of life largely renders the Romans irrelevant. But he never gathers an army and opposes them by force. In his earthly life, Jesus gives people what they need, but he does not give the people what they were asking for.

In today's story, the same pattern continues. Jesus, hearing the disciples' question about restoring the kingdom, offers this answer:

"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In other words, 'stop waiting for me to topple the Roman Empire,' he says. 'You yourselves are going to receive power, and it's on you to continue the work I began. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.'

This is rather disappointing news to the disciples who hoped Jesus was going to take care of everything for them. And then to add insult to injury, Jesus says these things and then he leaves. The text says that "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight...While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven...?'"

"What are you looking at, what are you waiting for?" these angels ask the disciples. "Jesus said you will receive power. *Get to work.*"

What is interesting is *how* they get to work. According to the story:

"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

The disciples go back to the upper room in Jerusalem, the place where they had the Last Supper with Jesus, and before getting to work, they devote themselves to an intense period of prayer. The disciples are notoriously bad at understanding what Jesus is about; they just recently have mistakenly asked him once again if he is going to topple the Roman Empire. Then at this point, they finally seem to be doing something right. Before striking out to continue the work of Jesus, they take some time to pray and listen. They slow down and ask if they really understand what their work is supposed to be. They pray and listen for the power of the Holy Spirit to speak.

My guess is that some of you are suspicious of this whole story, for you are not sure what it means that the Holy Spirit speaks and gives power to the disciples. You may be similarly suspicious about the resurrection of Jesus and that he rose from the dead and walked around—you're not sure what to think about that. Similarly, many of you are probably skeptical of his miraculous ascension into heaven, so the accompanying idea that upon his departure, he left the Holy Spirit to give them power seems not to make much sense. And it is my hunch that you doubt these things because you look around at your own life and you do not perceive that God is still doing these things—God does not seem to be active and speaking in the world in the same way as it happened in these stories in the Bible. So you are skeptical, and you have good reasons for being so.

But I'd like for you to consider this morning that perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Perhaps the problem is not that the Holy Spirit is no longer speaking in the world, but rather that we are not so good at listening. Perhaps, as this story advises, we should take some time, like the disciples did, to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying.

Consider, for example, what is going on when you are again working at home, late at night, and your child wakes up and comes in, wants to sit on your lap and spend time with you. Is this an annoying interruption? Or is it the Holy Spirit asking you a question about your ambition, your need for more money, your priorities?

Consider another example. What about when you're in church and we make these announcements about Interfaith Hospitality Network, Third Church ministries in East Westwood. Is it just another thing you don't have time to do? Or is it the Holy Spirit, reminding you that Cincinnati has one of the highest poverty rates in the country, asking you if you have given anything of yourself to try to change that, because you have more than you need?

Consider yet another example. What about when you read the news, and hear stories of Syria embroiled in civil war for the last eight years or, South Sudan where there are single refugee camps that are home to hundreds of thousands of people. Is that just sad news? Or might your access to that news be the work of the Holy Spirit, asking you what you're going to do with the deeply blessed life you have, a life of such comfort and safety here in one of the most fortunate neighborhoods in the world. We did nothing to be born into such good fortune. What did God put you here to do?

These are unsettling questions; they unsettle me. If you were looking for a story this morning about how God is going to solve it all for you, you may, like the disciples, be frustrated that you are not getting the answer you are looking for. You may be disappointed like the disciples were with the message the angels gave them: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" This story is unsettling. That's what happens when you show up on commitment weekend.

But there is a piece of good news here, one that we often neglect. As Jesus says to the disciples, so it is true for us: *You have received power*. The people who sit in this room enjoy a greater degree of power, fearlessness, autonomy, and freedom than most of the rest of our city, and certainly more than the rest of the world. For reasons that we cannot explain and do not deserve, God has freed us to live and love and serve. If it seems like God has not been speaking lately, or that the Holy Spirit has not been active...perhaps we have not been listening.

So I say to you, committed people of God, what is it that you are going to do? On this Memorial Day Weekend, when we celebrate people who were committed, who were willing to give their very lives for what they believed in, *what are you going to do about*

what you believe? And I say it because, we are people who have been given power, and God is not yet done with this world. And the Holy Spirit may be speaking to you.

Amen.

Text:

Acts 1:6-14