

“The Spirit of New Life”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 5/17/20

As some of you know my dad’s father, my Pawpaw, was a Baptist pastor who had inadvertently gotten baptized in the Holy Spirit in the early 1970s. He was eventually asked to leave his church, Columbia Heights Baptist Church in Gastonia, NC—a church he had brought to prominence in the 1960s when it became the first white church in Gastonia to racially integrate. Now he was forced to break with his denomination because of his new understanding of the Holy Spirit. I won’t dive into all those newly formed beliefs right now, but as we come upon our Christian celebration of the Day of Pentacost, the 50th Day (“penta”) after Passover, the day the Holy Spirit is said to have been sent to us (which this year will be Sunday May 31), I wanted to set aside these last three Sundays in May for a sermon series on the Holy Spirit. So, today starts the series in which I will discuss the Holy Spirit as “The Spirit of New Life.” Next Sunday we will examine the Holy Spirit as “The Spirit of Comfort” and finally on Pentacost we will look at the Holy Spirit as “The Spirit of Empowerment.” But again, today, we will focus on the Holy Spirit as “The Spirit of New Life.”

The Holy Spirit has taken on a complex identity in many circles, and is especially difficult to grasp for those who were not raised with the concept of the Holy Spirit in their homes, or as some of us grew up calling it, the “Holy Ghost.” But even for those of us who were raised conceptualizing it as an aberration almost physical manifestation of God, we may have in some ways diluted its relevance to our lives. The Holy Spirit may be a much simpler entity than many have made it out to be. Even the Jehovah’s Witnesses may have discovered this simplicity and been courageous enough not to fold on the matter, where as they believe the Holy Spirit to simply be “God’s active force.” Even when we first read about the Holy Spirit in Luke during Jesus’ water baptism and it says, “the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove,” we get the idea that God is breathing something life-giving into Jesus. From this point on Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven being “near” or “upon us” or even “here.” Over and over Jesus explains that a God once perceived to be far and distant is actually close and intimate. He further illustrates this when talking with the Samaritan woman who asks him to clear up these religious rituals of where to worship God, and says that God is in fact Spirit and asks people to worship their Creator in “spirit and in truth (or *authenticity*—John 4)”. Jesus is revealing a spiritual side of God that many seemed to have drifted away from by that point in history.

This is exemplified when Jesus has a lengthy discussion with a religious leader at the time, Nicodemus, and in John 3, he explains to Nicodemus that a person must be “reborn” in order to fully integrate oneself into God’s presence. This was fascinating to Nicodemus, if not shocking, and he jokes about it saying, “Must I go back into my mother’s womb?” Jesus plays along, and emphasizes that it’s the spirit that must be reborn this time (the human spirit, your spirit), not the physical body. Another word we can use instead of “spirit” is “soul,” or even “conscience.” It is the essence of ourselves outside of just our physical matter... it is the very “mind” itself. All of our psychologist friends here will certainly appreciate that, I think. We shouldn’t have to make more out of it than what it is. It is the core of our being, the stuff that makes me, me and you, you: our essence. This is what must be transformed, changed, reborn. John, Jesus’ cousin, even proclaimed to the people that God had told him that “the

one whom you see the Spirit descend upon and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33). Jesus brought with him God’s very essence and was freely offering it to all those who wanted to be immersed by it. “The kingdom of God is here!” Remember Jesus’ very words, right?

It was common knowledge even then that each human has a their own distinct spirit (or soul, or mind). And God has his/her (their) own distinct spirit or conscience. We see this in the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church when he asks, “For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the spirit of God?” Now what if, though, those two distinct spirits can merge, and there could be a flow of continuity between the two? I believe this is the “baptism” of the spirit, or the transformational “rebirth” that Jesus talked about: New life, if you will. Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in God.” You can swap out the word “abide” with “live.” *Live in me as I live in God.* In John 15, we can see that there is a continuity of life where consciousnesses or spirits merge, one with another. There is a convergence. This is the process of “New Life”: or better yet, rebirth. And it is at this point of personal transformation that we experience a peaceful, mind easing, gentle harmony. I want that! Don’t you? To feel the essence of all things in harmony with one another... I’ve called this in this past The Great Dance: Creator and Creation dancing as one.

I love how Jesus explains to Nicodemus the significance of “spiritual rebirth” versus “physical birth.” He speaks of the spirit as something you cannot see directly, but you can clearly see the effects of it, like “the wind” itself. This will not be the only time that the “spirit,” especially God’s spirit is connected with a physical “wind”—as we see later on the Day of Pentacost. But I love the idea of Holy Spirit being wrapped into the physical manifestation of “wind” because wind contains within it “breath,” literally for us what is considered the breath of life, right?—oxygen. It is nature’s natural CPR for us animals, where Mother Nature breathes very life into our lungs, without which we simply cannot survive. And for any of us who have breathed in a gust of wind, it is truly euphoric. It’s like receiving New Life.

Now I don’t believe that God’s Spirit (or essence) is exclusive. No, not at all. Though Jesus was confronting a society that seemed to have drifted away from seeing God in those terms and implored them to join him in connecting with God on a spiritual plain, I don’t believe it means that God hasn’t been actively connecting with Creation on a spiritual level from the beginning and freely offers that convergence to all of us, every day, every minute, every second. Of course God has been connecting with all of creation on spiritual levels from the beginning and will continue to do so. But the question I pose for us today is “are we plugging in? When we dig deeply within ourselves, are we truly settled into silence so as to hear God’s voice speak? And if so what is God saying? What is our still small voice within saying? What is that “living into God’s presence” providing in way of clarity and harmony, peace and joy? My hope is that we are finding that sacred touch-point with the Divine, and if not—that we will work even now to discover it again, and to simply settle there for a while. Why leave it? Ever? Pray with me for a moment...