

“The Spirit Within”

Joel 2:23-28; John 13:34, 35; 14:15-17

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2009

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, Ivan Peden
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As we continue our Fall Preaching Series, *Holy Spirit, Fall Afresh On Us*, it is important that we recognize the Holy Spirit in our midst. How do we do that? How can we recognize God’s spirit among us?

I am reminded of a story about a little girl visiting an Episcopal Church for the first time with her mother. The young child noticed the pastor coming into the sanctuary in a flowing white robe. She turned to her mother and asked in a very loud whisper, “Mother, is that the Holy Ghost?” Aware that other people had heard her child’s question, the mother was embarrassed and turned to her and said, “Shhhh! Be quiet!” But the little girl would not be silenced. She asked again, “Well, then, where is the Holy Ghost?” That really confused her mother. She didn’t know what to say to her child. Nor would many Christians know what to say when asked how we recognize the Holy Spirit among us.

The child’s question is a challenge. So let’s ask ourselves today: “Where is the Holy Spirit?” In Acts chapter 2, verse 4, following Jesus’ ascension to heaven, we read what happened to the eleven disciples who had locked themselves in an upper room in Jerusalem – timid, uncertain, and afraid. We read these words: *Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sittingAll of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.* That’s how it started ...with nothing ...nothing except God’ spirit and some frightened Jews, followers of Jesus of Nazareth ...sitting behind locked doors in fear of persecution by their religious leaders. No programs, no church buildings, no budget ...nothing except God’s spirit and each other. And the Holy Spirit entered into these eleven men: filling them, empowering them. After the drama of the Day of Pentecost was all over, where was the Holy Spirit? God’s spirit was *within* them ...as Jesus had promised saying: “The Holy Spirit will be *within* you.” (John 14:17).

Where is the Holy Spirit today? There is a temptation to want to confine the Holy

Spirit to the work, the activity, the programs, and the functions of the Christian church. Sure, God's spirit is at work in all the mission and ministry activities of this and every local church: in our ministry to children and youth, in our outreach into the community through programs like Angel Food Ministry, Prayer Shawl Ministry, Gifts Galore, United Methodist Women, Trunk 'r Treat, the choirs of the church, InterFaith Hospitality Ministry, Bible Studies, Food Ministry to our Homebound Members, Prayer Ministry, and so on. No one would doubt for one minute that the Holy Spirit is not present in these ministry activities and events. But what if we quit all the programs overnight? What if no one pledged during this current Stewardship Campaign? What if the budget for 2010 was not raised? What if there was no more money to do the things we are doing in the name of Jesus Christ at present? Where would the Holy Spirit be then?

Pursuing this line of thinking, I quote the well-known Christian author, Frederick Beuchner, who addressed this subject – albeit tongue in cheek, a little facetiously, and quite prophetically – when he wrote: *Maybe the church as Big Business should declare bankruptcy. Maybe the best thing that could happen would be for all its buildings and real estate to be sold and the money given to the poor and the clergy to be gathered together and sent to colonize the moon, and all the communities to be disbanded, and all the computers and fax machines to be recycled, so that we will have nothing left except for God and each other, which was where it all started in the first place. Who knows?*

Where is the Holy Spirit? Jesus said that God's spirit would abide with us and be *within* us. The primary place to look for the Holy Spirit is within us, rather than outside of us. *And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit*, Luke records in Acts 2:4. Initially, the Jews were filled with God's spirit; later the Gentiles were filled with the Spirit; and now we are filled with God's spirit. Here is the key to solving the question about recognizing the Holy Spirit in our midst: *they were filled with the Holy Spirit.*

If you are looking for the Holy Spirit today, don't look primarily in the programs, or buildings, or activities for God's spirit. Don't look for the Holy Spirit only in the outside things like programs, buildings, institutions, and activities ...rather, look inside ...look within ...look into your heart and soul ...look into my heart and soul ...look for the qualities of

Jesus' life within you and within me ...look for what the Letter to the Galatians in chapter 5 lists as the "fruit of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God's spirit produces these qualities *within* us.

Now listen to what Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." (John 13:34, 35). That is where we will find God's spirit all over the world: in our capacity as Christians to love one another. "If you love me," Jesus said, "you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ... You know him because he abides with you, and he will be within you." (John 14:15-17).

When we are looking for the Holy Spirit we will have to look within because God's spirit works from the inside out, not outside in. Let's look inside ...look at our readiness to love God and one another ...to acknowledge God for whom God is, and to see people as God sees them. Let's look within ...that's where we will find how much we love God and love one another.

There's a rather dated contemporary worship song with these lyrics:

All over the world the Spirit is moving, as the prophet said it would be;

All over the world there's a mighty revelation of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

We live in what is often called the "post Easter" era of Christianity, but it may also be very accurately described as the "post-Pentecostal" era of the Christian church. We live in times when the Holy Spirit is unfettered, unleashed, uninhibited ...when the Holy Spirit is not only on center stage, but when the spirit of God leaves the stage and descends upon the audience, which includes us, with an unparalleled power and an intoxicating influence that turns everyone of us from spectators to participants, from hearers to doers, from doubters to believers, from being those who hoard to those who give generously, from being those who hate to being those who love God and love one another, and from being timid, weak followers of Jesus to being bold, powerful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost it looked like they were ablaze with fire. We all know that lighting a fire in a fireplace in a room results in the spread of the glow, the radiance, the warmth, and the light of the fire to every crevice and dark corner of the room. We cannot isolate the effects of the fire to one section of the room where it was lit. It is the very nature of fire to spread, to permeate, and to fill. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, a 20th Century German theologian by the name of Emil Brunner, once said, “Fire kindles fire.” In other words, the Holy Spirit is contagious and spreads. Someone has described how a prairie fire “leaps from blade to blade.” A song writer expressed the spread of God’s spirit in these words:

It only takes a spark to get a fire going.

And then all those around can warm up in its glowing.

That’s how it is with God’s love –

Once you’ve experienced it.

You want to sing;

It’s fresh like Spring ...

You want to pass it on.

Where is the Holy Spirit? In our hearts when they are ablaze with God’s spirit ...when they are full of God’s spirit ...ablaze with and full of our love for God and for one another ...a love that begins with a spark in our lives but can spread to become a wild fire, consuming and uniting people of different cultures, languages, religions, and nationalities because the gift of the Holy Spirit is to *all* people, as the prophet Joel declared when he said on God’s behalf: “*In those days,*” says the Lord, “*I will pour out my Spirit on **all** flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your old people shall dream dreams, and your young people shall see visions.*”

Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Us! O God, put your new and right spirit within each one of us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.