

The Power of the Spirit

Isaiah 61: 1-4

Acts 2: 42-47

At Pentecost, we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem. We mark the occasion by wearing red for the presence of the Spirit which is described as *like* tongues of fire coming to rest on each of the disciples. It was prefaced by a violent wind that filled the entire house. Wow, that's dramatic!

You would think that Pentecost would have been a celebrated occasion in the life in the church from early days. Yet, Pentecost is almost the last season to be given status in the early church. Advent and the Nativity, or Christmas, were the last seasons to be adopted for recognition. For the first several centuries, the church only celebrated Easter and Epiphany. Epiphany? Yes, Epiphany which marks the baptism of Jesus.

The only reason we get such attention paid to Pentecost and the Nativity, which doesn't come until the 4th century, is due to the councils that were held after Constantine's edict of toleration for Christianity. Those councils got bogged down in controversies over defining the divinity of Jesus and the divinity of the Holy Spirit, all of which led to the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed, and later the Apostles Creed.

Let's remember that the Spirit of God was there in the opening verses of the creation story in Genesis. That would be the same Spirit of God that gets recognized regularly throughout the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. The Spirit of God was there all along. But we have this great story in Acts 2 about the Spirit of God coming upon the disciples, like the Spirit of God was suddenly hatched for the followers of Jesus. In fact, it gets such play because this is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus back in his last resurrection appearance in Luke 24 (:49).

Apart from the big show of wind and something *like* fire, a rather unique account of the presence of the Holy Spirit, how do we understand what the Holy Spirit brings?

I thought we should go back to the synagogue where Jesus first gave the lesson. In Mark's gospel, that's the synagogue where the unclean spirits had the front row seats, and as Jesus was teaching, the unclean spirits in the synagogue began shrieking at his teaching. Jesus read from the text of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Not only do we have the profession of the Spirit's presence and anointing by the prophet, we get the whole agenda for the Spirit of God. The tragic fortunes of God's people are to be reversed. There is finally good news for those who have faced nothing but oppression, poverty, bondage, hardship, and sadness. The Spirit has chosen this servant – unnamed in Isaiah – to bring God's will to action and fulfillment for God's suffering people.

When Jesus reads from this text, it's clear from the context that he is announcing his own calling and ministry. The same Spirit of God that summoned the servant in Isaiah was at work in Jesus of Nazareth to bring him out of hiding in the hills of Galilee and into the servant work of the Kingdom of God.

We get a good sense of what the Spirit is all about. Clearly it's about advancing the Kingdom and bringing to fruition what God desires from the creation. Kingdom values are at its heart, and Jesus will be all about Kingdom values in his ministry.

We can also discover some things that the Spirit is not about. It is not about speaking in tongues or working magical powers of healing or other miracles. The scene in Acts 2 when the Spirit comes upon the disciples probably started out as a story of speaking in tongues. However, somewhere along the path of story transmission, that speaking in tongues facet got dropped. In its place, we have foreign languages being heard by foreigners on the streets who are in Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the festival.

It's an expression of the universality of the Spirit of God and the Kingdom that reaches out to God's people everywhere. Universality, of course, is the exact opposite of speaking in tongues which is about as particular and exceptional as you can get. Universality happens to be one of Luke's favorite themes, Luke having written both Luke and Acts.

This is also something of a contrast with the traditional seven gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11 and the nine gifts of the Spirit in Paul's First Corinthian letter (12:7-11). The traditional seven gifts are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Paul has wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues – a very different list. But it's still a list, isn't it?

It reminds me of popular articles and blog posts today. Everything is a list. "Do these three things to lose weight." "The top 5 ways to improve your happiness." "The 7 qualities of good leadership." "The four tricks for better memory." "The 7 gifts of the Spirit" – it fits right in. These lists tend to be basic items, rather general, a bit more helpful than a shopping list, unless you got to the store and realize that you left it at home. Then you should have read that article on "The four tricks for better memory."

The presence of the Spirit of God is all about the empowerment of God's chosen servants to act with faithful commitment in fulfilling God's aims for God's people. Those gifts of the Spirit lists are like a gift list – it's what you get rather than what you do.

Compare those lists of gifts of the Spirit to what the servant of God – who has the Spirit of the Lord upon him – has to do. Here is his work list: (1) bring good news to the oppressed, (2) bind up the broken-hearted, (3) proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; (4) proclaim the [Jubilee] year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; (5) comfort all who mourn; (6) provide the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Now you know why we have people memorizing those lists of 7 or 9 gifts of the Spirit. No one in their right mind wants the 6 item list given to the servant who has the Spirit of the Lord upon him in Isaiah 61.

The next question might be: what exactly did Pentecost bring to the brand new community of Jesus followers in Jerusalem? What are the fruits of the Spirit after Pentecost? Because you **know** there's a list of the fruits of the Spirit from Paul's Galatians letter. It may sound eerily familiar. Paul writes: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." I've had enough of sweet innocuous lists; how about you? They're fine for what they are, but I'm looking for something with less sugar and more substance.

After the whole Pentecost show by the Holy Spirit, and the long monologue by Peter in Acts 2, we then get one of the fascinating narrator notes about what was happening in regular life in this earliest community of Jesus followers.

Our passage begins: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* As we surmise from other accounts in the earliest church, "the breaking of bread" or some form of basic enactment of the Last Supper was a mainstay in community life. It's also noteworthy that the apostles assumed a teaching role, providing some instruction of some kind. We can imagine that it included a variety of things; interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures, teachings that Jesus had shared with them, how to negotiate the demands of Jewish Torah-Law, how the community would be organized and what values would be given priority.

The passage continues: *Everyone was filled with awe, and many sign and wonders were done by the apostles.* We don't get a detailed description of what these signs and wonders were; we shouldn't assume that they were like some of the miracle stories that we'd hear about later. "Signs and wonders" can mean lots of things. That they aren't explained suggests that great things were happening through their ministry, even if they weren't miracles *per se*.

Then there is an explanation about how they shared goods and possessions, ensuring everyone had whatever they needed. This seems to be a way of embracing the belief that God had provided for all that they need; they simply needed to organize themselves to ensure that none were lacking in any way – a modeling of the Kingdom really. It mentions of how each ate in their own home, a suggestion of private property that contrasts with Acts 4 and the conversion of property for the common treasury. Regardless, they were seeking to model the Kingdom values that Jesus had taught them.

Finally, their community of believers was growing and seemed to have good reviews from those who knew them. They were probably known as the ones to go to when you had a dire problem, people who would be compassionate and who would be reluctant to pass judgment or summarily dismiss someone's concerns. The one they called Messiah preached a message of love and compassion, of abundance and sharing, of being sisters and brothers of the Creator of all life, and of the time coming when the world would be changed by this message of love and forgiveness, of justice and equity. It was a community that you would **want** to be a part of, from which you could envision and form a new life.

You can keep the lists about the gifts of the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit. And yes, the Spirit's call to the servant in Isaiah is a bit breath-taking, even though it does give the dimension and the dynamic of what the Spirit of God is all about. But we do find the new community blessed by the Spirit of God at Pentecost working through the meaning of Jesus' teachings, and working through how they can model the Kingdom of God and represent its values in the personal and community living.

May we give thanks for the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that set the community of faithful Jesus followers in a direction that sought to honor his teachings and model a vision of the Kingdom and its new life promise for all. May we also reimagine our ministry as the Spirit of God anoints us and calls us to serve the Kingdom of our Lord.