

February 10, 2019

We Believe

We Believe in the Holy Spirit

Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:1-4

Opening words: Let us begin by remembering the words of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;*
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed was not written by the Apostles; it is called the Apostles' Creed because it summarizes the teachings of the Apostles. The Apostles' Creed is important because it does three things. First, the Apostles' Creed tells the world what we believe. That is important because our world is getting smaller. Non-Christians want to know what we believe. Second, the Apostles' Creed reminds us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, of our core beliefs. Being a good person is not good enough. Christian theology is clear and structured. Third, the Apostles' Creed reminds us that we stand with the church throughout the ages. Ours is not the first generation to recite these words. The Apostles' Creed is a historical document, which came to us from the first and second centuries. We stand with the saints of the past. Each phrase of the Apostles' Creed is grounded in scripture.

Today, I am going to continue my sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, *We Believe*. In the first three messages, we have looked at the Christian understanding of God, Jesus, and the forgiveness of sins. In two weeks, I will conclude this sermon series by looking at the church. Today, I am looking at the the faith's understanding of the Holy Spirit. This is the question you must answer: Have you experienced the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is a complex topic. It is not unique to the Christian faith. It is found in other world religions, but their understanding of the Holy Spirit varies. For example, in Islam, the Holy Spirit is only mentioned four times in the Quran. Each time, it helps the angel Gabriel communicate some divine message. In the Hebrew faith, the Holy Spirit is called the *Ruach*, the very breath of God. In the Bahai faith, the Holy Spirit is called Most Great Spirit. It is only given to divine messengers and prophets, including Muhammad and Jesus. In Buddhism, the Holy Spirit is comparable to the Buddha-nature. It helps those on the journey reach their spiritual goals. In Sikhism, only the guru has access to the Holy Spirit. In Zoroastrianism, the Holy Spirit is seen as the primary source of all goodness in the world. In the study of comparative religions, there are few concepts more complex than the Holy Spirit. Our scripture reading for today is Joel 2:28-32. Let me call this message *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*.

Joel 2:28-32 "And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
³⁰ I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.
³² And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the LORD has said,
even among the survivors
whom the LORD calls.

Acts 2: 1-4

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.

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was an Anglo-Irish Bible teacher. He once said, "*The presence of the Holy Spirit is the keystone for all of our hopes.*" I can't disagree with that quote. If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, before a civil war threatened to divide America, before Columbus discovered the New World or before Rome conquered their world, there was a man who spoke on behalf of God. His name meant, YAHWEH is God, but we call him Joel. He is one of the Minor Prophets. He is not considered minor because his message is unimportant. He is considered minor because his book is brief. Joel lived, according to the scholars, during the ninth century B.C. Like most of the prophets, Joel's generation was suffering. The people were experiencing both a severe draught and a plague of locusts. The people felt like victims, but Joel offers them words of hope. God has not forgotten them. They will be restored and refreshed, once they repent. Our reading for today tells us how God plans to refresh and restore his people. God's method of choice is the Holy Spirit. Joel's generation heard about the Holy Spirit, but they never experienced the Holy Spirit. God never seems to be in a hurry. God wouldn't send the Holy Spirit for another 900 years. You know the story. We look at it annually.

It had been fifty days since Jesus had been resurrected. That makes it the day of Pentecost, a Hebrew festival to thank God for the harvest. As requested by Jesus, the disciples are together in Jerusalem, including Judas Iscariot's replacement, Matthias. (Acts 1:4). After 900 years of waiting, the Holy Spirit suddenly arrived. The author of this text, Luke, tells us the Holy Spirit was evident in two ways. First, there was a violent wind. The Holy Spirit was always symbolized by wind (Ezekiel 37:9, 14, John 3:8). Second, there seemed to be tongues of fires that separated and came to rest on each one of them. Acts 2:4 says, *"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..."* The word ALL is important because it was the first time the Holy Spirit was given to everyone. The question is not, if the Holy Spirit is available to us. The question is, have you experienced the Holy Spirit? This is the truth: Church membership or participation does not guarantee an experience with the Holy Spirit. That is painfully true. You can even find that to be the case in the Bible.

Do you remember the story of Apollos from the nineteenth chapter of Acts? Paul is on his way to Rome and stops at various communities along the way. One of the places he visits is the Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was headed by a man named Apollos. He had many gifts to offer the church. He was an educated, natural leader. His only limitation was his ignorance of the Holy Spirit. His understanding of the faith was based on moralism, not grace. Paul recognized this deficiency and corrected the situation. On the spot, Paul baptized Apollos in the name of Jesus, laying hands on him. Apollos was not the only one who had never experienced the Holy Spirit in that church. The scriptures tell us, twelve men experienced the Holy Spirit that day. So, let me ask you our question again. Have you experienced the Holy Spirit? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** This is a more basic question:

Who is the Holy Spirit? We believe, the Holy Spirit is a member of the trinity. What does that mean? We believe in a triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe there is one God with distinct manifestations. When we speak of God the Father, we are speaking of God as the creator. When we speak of God the Son, we are speaking of

God the redeemer. Jesus was the incarnation of God, God in human form, who came to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. When we speak of God the Holy Spirit, we are speaking of God the life giver. We believe the Holy Spirit is accessible to all believers, and the Holy Spirit helps us do ministry. The Holy Spirit magnifies our witness, enhances our prayers, and gives us gifts to serve God. Great things happen when the Holy Spirit is present. Nothing happens when the Holy Spirit is absent. The question is not, if you understand the Holy Spirit? The question is, have you experienced the Holy Spirit? I can't answer that question for you. I can only answer that question for myself. The answer is yes! This is my story. I hope you can relate.

I enrolled at Mount Union College in the Fall of 1975. When you go to college, everyone asks you the same two questions: Where are you from, and what is your major? I answered both questions proudly. I was from Warren, where everyone is a little smarter and better looking, and I was a religion major. However, I never earned my religion degree. My Bachelor's Degree is in Business Administration. Do you know why I didn't earn my Religion Degree? My answer is almost comical. I am addicted to public speaking now, but as a college student, I was terrified of public speaking. It all changed one night. I was walking alone down the side streets near the campus. I was anxious about school and was clueless about my future. As I walked, I prayed in a soft voice. I don't remember the exact words, but it went like this: Help me! On that night, God heard my prayer. There is no other way to explain it. The Holy Spirit came over me, and I felt a wonderful calm. All my senses were heightened. It was like I was hearing for the first time. It was like I was seeing for the first time. I was filled with a new confidence and a wonderfully satisfying peace. I really didn't know what the future held for me, but I knew everything was going to be fine. Because, God was with me. I went back to campus a changed person. On that night, I didn't know what happened to me, but something happened. I would never be the same again. Several years later, I found out what happened. I was in a seminary classroom studying the Holy Spirit. The topic that day was sanctification. I was sanctified, set apart, for a special purpose.

I rarely speak of that night, because I don't want to sound weird, but that night changed my life. The Holy Spirit was with me then, and I know the Holy Spirit is with me now. I do not completely understand the Holy Spirit, but I do know it is vital to my life. This is the truth: I have never struggled in the ministry. It is like the Holy Spirit goes ahead of me, helping me. The ministry comes naturally to me. There just always seems to be a good person to help me. There are many good people who overlook my shortcomings. I have survived in the ministry not because I am talented, intelligent or handsome. I have survived in the ministry because the Holy Spirit is with me, helping me along the way. Yes, I have experienced the Holy Spirit. Have you experienced the Holy Spirit? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

One of the great dates in Methodist history is May 24, 1738. For it was on that date that John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, experienced the Holy Spirit first-hand. It was his sanctification experience. It happened on Aldersgate Street in

London. He never spoke much about that experience. In his journal he simply wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." However, that experience changed his life. He was transformed from a "loser" into one of the great figures in church history. When he died in 1791, he had 79,000 followers in England and the United States. His movement lived beyond his life. In 1957, there were 40 million Methodists in the world. It all began in a little chapel on Aldersgate Street.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (1893-1976) recognized the significance of that spot and went to visit it. When he arrived, it was dark and damp. He read the single bronze plaque on the wall. It read: "On this spot, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed." He read it several times, once out loud. He then retreated to the corner of the chapel and found a pew. In the silence, he thought and prayed about that moment in history. Suddenly, he heard the door open and watched a shadowy character walk in. It was an older gentleman. (He was 61 😊) He walked straight toward the plaque. Thinking he was alone, he too read it out loud: "On this spot, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed." Yet, instead of sitting in silence, the older gentleman spoke. He said, "Do it again, Lord. Do it again for me!" I would add, do it again for us!

This is morning, I want to end with a challenge. I challenge you to pray that you experience the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to have an opinion about the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to know something about the Holy Spirit. You must experience the Holy Spirit, because once you experience the Holy Spirit, you will be changed. Do you remember what John Nelson Darby once said? He said, "*The presence of the Holy Spirit is the keystone of all of our hopes.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"