

THE PROMISE

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Acts 1:1-11

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of my Father, which I told you about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 1:4)

Preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville

by the Rev. David Handley

May 20, 2012

As we begin this summer sermon series from The Acts of the Apostles, we would do well to ask, “What does a life, lived in the Spirit of Jesus, look like?” The Acts of the Apostles is the dramatic story of the birth and rapid growth of the early Church. Some have called it “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Luke, “the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14) and faithful companion of the Apostle Paul, begins this sequel to his Gospel, “*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach...*” The implication is that volume two will be about all Jesus *continued* to do and to teach, through the Holy Spirit.

Today I am simply going to paint a collage of pictures of what a “life in the Spirit” looks like. Next week, on Pentecost Sunday, I am going to describe in more detail the habits and the attitudes that prepare our souls, and the Church, to be filled with that Spirit.

First, a “life in the Spirit” is a life that expects God to show up each day in some way. What does our benediction at the end of each service say? It is printed in your bulletins now each week: “Remember, you go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you; wherever you are, God has placed you there.” And Jesus’ promise is, when you go in my name...*I will be with you always...*! (Matthew 28:20)

This is “The Promise.” Jesus will be present with us through the Holy Spirit. He said, “*Wait for the promise of the Father; you have been baptized in water; but, as John the Baptist said, I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*”

Now, if this is true, then we should cultivate a heightened attentiveness to life. We have a small group of elders who meet with me every Thursday evening. We begin each meeting with one of us sharing a 20-minute version of our spiritual autobiography. We take 10 minutes then to interact with any connections we made with the story told, and questions we may have. And then we read through a half chapter from the Gospels and discuss it. Before the reading, I ask the question, “Did anyone here see Jesus show up in your life this week?” Two weeks ago, one of our elders told us how she got the idea that when she picked up her dry cleaning, she was supposed to share her faith in any way she could with the person there she had known for quite some time. So she went in with a purpose, beyond simply picking up her dry cleaning. As she was paying the bill, she talked with some enthusiasm about the things happening at our church, and invited the friend to join us on a Sunday.

At our meeting, I asked our elder how she felt as she walked away from that encounter. It was pretty obvious that it made her day; something special had happened. And she was able to see Jesus “showing up” in the middle of her routine week—through the idea that was given her; then in the courage to follow through; and finally in the words that Holy Spirit gave as she spoke. A life in the Spirit expects God to show up in some way each day.

Secondly, a life in the Spirit gives us a different eye toward the people we encounter.

Now, we have certain pre-conceived attitudes toward people. There are some we like, and some we don’t like. We categorize people. There are some who fit into our hierarchy of who is important and who is not so important. There is a certain role each person plays in our lives; and especially when we are in a hurry, we treat certain people as objects. But “Life in the Spirit” gives us a different eye toward the people we encounter.

The Apostle Paul put it this way, in his letter to the Corinthians: “*From now on, we see no one from a human point of view.*” (II Corinthians 5:16) When Jesus sent His disciples out, He said, “*You will receive a new ability, when the Holy Spirit is given you; an ability to be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8) Jesus is giving them a picture of concentric circles: Jerusalem was their immediate neighborhood, where they were right then....With what eye do you look upon your neighbor? Is it that person who doesn’t keep his house up very well, or never trims the bushes? Or is that person one who, beneath appearances, really would be helped to have Christ in his life? Thoreau wrote, “Most men live lives of quiet desperation.”¹ One never knows, but the person most desperate for the Hope that Christ offers may be your next door neighbor.

“*You will be my witnesses...in Jerusalem, in Judea...*” Judea was the surrounding area, the “suburbs,” the wider community, the community of Clarksville. There are certain people you encounter regularly across town. People you work with in school issues, or business, or you

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

see them at soccer or baseball games. A “life in the Spirit” reminds you that you have a purpose and an identity as you go into your “Judea”—*You will be my witnesses*, Jesus said. You don’t know what to say or to do in order to share your faith. But when you remember who you are (“a witness” to Jesus Christ), the Holy Spirit will help you. “Remember, you go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has placed you there...” And that belief gives you a different eye towards the people you encounter.

Thirdly, a life in the Spirit helps us in our praying. Now, I don’t know about you, but I find Prayer to be the most important, and the most difficult exercise of my Christian experience. When I sit down and try to be still so I can pray...my mind flies off in every direction, except toward God. I think of my to-do list; I think of something somebody said to me; and oh, my gosh, I forgot to respond to Jack’s email; and how am I ever going to get through all I have to do today? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

But now, maybe we need to expand our view of what prayer is. Here is what the Apostle Paul says about “life in the Spirit” and Prayer: *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know what to pray or how to pray; but the Spirit prays through us with groans deeper than words.”* (Romans 8:26) Is it a surprise to you that the Apostle Paul struggled with his prayers?! I find that immensely encouraging. “We do not know what to pray or how to pray,” he says. “But the Spirit prays through us with groans...” Expand your view of what prayer is. Don’t use the preacher’s public prayers as a model, please! “O Thou infinite and exalted One who is above us and in us, whose majesty fills the heavens...” Yada yada yada. Listen instead to your heart, your gut; the passions that drive you, the fears that cause you to tremble. And hear beneath all of these the “groans” of your soul! “O God, help!...O God, save me!...O God, help my child!...” Deep beneath your anxieties is a loving Spirit who knows us as well as Jesus knew people through and through, and helps us with our prayers. It is a wonderful thing to be *known* by someone who loves us. Jesus said, *“Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask!”* Sometimes our “groanings” will be more like shouts of Thanksgiving. One of our elders told me of a friend who said the only prayers we really need are the short ones: “Thank You; thank You; thank You!...Help me; help me; help me!”

Now, if you need help in bringing those groans together into some more focused prayer, there are some things that help. Reading a Psalm each day can spark your “groanings” toward God. The Psalms express the heights and depths of our human emotions. Some will offer you the exact words to pray, that fit so well (check out Psalm 139:1-18); others don’t give you the exact words, but they spark your imagination, your thinking, and the words then mysteriously come to you when you use the Psalm as an airplane uses the runway.

For some it helps to write your prayers in a journal. I have to say, this is the one thing that has revolutionized my prayer life, when I began to write out my prayers. It gives me focus, and it gives a certain reality to the prayer I am praying, so I take it as seriously as God takes it.

Often it is in the midst of reading my half chapter of one of the Gospels, and my prayers become thoughts, insights, or questions that I think aloud to the Lord, as if I were in conversation with Him.

There are books of prayers that help in the same way. John Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer* is a classic. Not that we should stop with his prayers, but that they can become a catalyst for our own "groanings" of the soul. And in those groanings, because the Spirit is helping us in our weakness, we feel that we have truly connected, and there is a relationship with the living God that is real.

The last thing I want to identify for today about "life in the Spirit" is that it gives us a special expectation when the Bible is read. Now, this is so important—both for your own personal faith, but also for the thriving of your church. Please, do not build your future church on the charisma of the preacher. That is a very flimsy foundation. Every preacher, no matter how gifted, will have some good Sundays and some not so good. The role of the preacher is not to share his or her own opinions about this or that; it is not to strive to be as motivational or as clever as he can be. James Denney, taught preaching at the Free Church College of Glasgow, Scotland, and used to say to his students, "It is impossible for the preacher to make his congregation think that he is clever and that Christ is wonderful, all in the same sermon." **The role of the preacher is to build the congregation's confidence in the Word of God and help them discover how Jesus Christ unlocks its meaning for their everyday lives.** This is what the risen Christ was doing for those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And "*their hearts burned within them*" (Luke 24:26-27, 32).

So, what does that mean for the way you must worship if your faith is to grow and if this church is to thrive? It means exactly this: the most important active listening you do in the entire worship service is during the readings of the Word of God. And if you listen to those readings with the *expectation* that God will be speaking directly to you, you will hear God. Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, and that Spirit is present in a special way when the Word of God is read. In both your personal reading, and in your active listening during worship, make it like a treasure hunt to find what God is trying to say to you. Ask yourself the question continually, "**Why is this scripture coming to me at this time in my life?**"

We are not alone...because this "promise from the Father," as Jesus put it, is true. You can count on it. Alleluia! Amen.