

God's Empowering Presence

Pentecost Sunday - June 8, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Ezekiel 36:26-28

²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Acts 2:1-4

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our fourth symbol is that of the dove, one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit.

The power of presence

Presence is delicious.¹ Telephones, e-mail, letters and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are wonderful, but nothing is like actually being with someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn't just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple. Now . . . they weren't so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way.

By the time of Ezekiel, God's temple had stood for more than 400 years. But rather than living as God had taught them - loving God and loving neighbor - God's people had wrapped themselves in superficial religious trappings (Jeremiah 7:1-4). Since the Jews had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God, God's presence departed the temple, "Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . ." (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God did not forever abandon his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (from today's passage).



The Dove

All four Gospel writers tell us that at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, God's Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus. Luke put it this way, ". . . and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22).

Though doves appear in the Old Testament, never before in Jewish traditions had a dove been used to represent God's Spirit. This is new! The descent of God's Spirit upon Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, marks out Jesus as God's "beloved Son" and prepares us for the uniqueness of Jesus and his mission. Later, returning to his hometown, Jesus would rise in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me."

¹ I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, whose work underlies much of this week's study. Dr. Fee is a highly regarded New Testament scholar. He is also a Pentecostal. Pentecostals are keenly aware of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly then, Dr. Fee has devoted considerable efforts to helping the Christian community see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a small, still voice, but is the very presence of God in our lives.

The return of God's presence

For Paul, the Holy Spirit is not some impersonal power at work in the universe, akin to the “force” in Star Wars. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the very presence of God, who has returned to dwell in and with his people – first in Jesus, then in the disciples at Pentecost, then in all Christians to this very day. Using the Old Testament temple imagery, Paul reminds the early Christian communities that they, collectively, are the temple of God, in whom God now dwells. “Do you² not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16-17; see also 2 Cor 6:16-18). But Paul goes further, reminding individual Christians that each of them is a temple of the one true God, in whom God dwells and works. “Or do you³ not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor 6:19-20)

God's empowering presence in our lives

As told in today’s passage from Acts, not long after Jesus’ ascension, his disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. There, with extraordinary power, God’s Spirit’s descended on them, marking the return of God’s presence with his people and the arrival of God’s kingdom. Granted, it was obvious to them that God’s kingdom had not yet been fully realized; there was still much pain and tragedy and brokenness in the world. But, as Gordon Fee wrote, “the Spirit was both the certain evidence that the future had dawned and the absolute guarantee of its final consummation.”⁴

The Holy Who?

Never . . . not once . . . in the Bible is the Holy Spirit referred to using the impersonal pronoun “it.” Rather, the Holy Spirit is always a “who,” referred to using personal pronouns. At various times, the Holy Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens, and is lied to!* These words and phrases describe what persons do, not inanimate objects or impersonal forces.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to think of the Holy Spirit as a person. We generally use the word “spirit” in impersonal ways. Our images of the Holy Spirit – a dove, wind, fire – are all impersonal. So, we have to retrain ourselves to refer to and think of the Holy Spirit as the very personal presence of God with us. Perhaps it will help if we remember this, Paul uses the title “Holy Spirit” about as many times as he uses the title “Lord Jesus Christ”!

The Holy Spirit is the renewed presence of God among his people – collectively and individually. This ought to take our breath away! We are Christians. We place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We have all been born from above (John 3). We have all received the Holy Spirit – as the church and as individual believers. God is always with us. If it doesn’t feel like it at times, it isn’t because God has gone anywhere, it is because we have. God’s presence, his Holy Spirit, is with us always. So . . . it shouldn’t surprise us when Paul urges us to show the fruit of God’s ever-present Spirit working in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are the people of the Spirit. We live by the Spirit and are to be guided by the Spirit. We have the “Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9), who enables us to cry, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6)

Next week

This week’s symbol, the dove, is closely tied to our Rose Window symbol for next week – the fleur-de-lis, a symbol of the Trinity. Though our affirmation that God is triune may seem remote and incomprehensible, it is absolutely fundamental to our faith and underlies all that we proclaim to the world. We proclaim that there is one God who exists as a community of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are indivisible yet distinct; they comprise a unity of three; they are equal and eternal. The Holy Spirit, represented today by the dove, is truly and completely God, every bit as much as Jesus and every bit as much as the Father. More to come . . .

² The “you” here is plural in the Greek. A problem in reading English translations is that there is no way to tell a singular “you” from a plural “you.” In some ways, it would be better if a plural “you” were translated as “y’all”!!

³ Here, the “you” is singular!

⁴ From Gordon Fee’s book, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1996. This is an excellent easy-to-read treatment of Dr. Fee’s exhaustive work on all of Paul’s references to the Holy Spirit.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 63:7-14 God's presence, his Spirit, saves.</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 3:21-22; John 1:19-34 John the Baptizer and Jesus' baptism</p>
<p>Day 3 John 15:26-16:15 At the last supper, Jesus' teaches his disciple about the Advocate, the helper, the Spirit.</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 2 The Spirit comes on Pentecost; Peter's first great speech brings many to Christ</p>
<p>Day 5 Galatians 5:13-6:10 The behavior of those who are called in freedom to live by the Spirit.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

