

“Life in the Spirit: I Believe in the Holy Spirit”

Acts 10:34-48

May 23, 2021

The Book of Acts, which we’ve been exploring for six weeks now, is the Holy Spirit’s story. From start to finish, it is the account of God’s Spirit moving God’s people to deeper faithfulness and wider welcome. It begins with the ascension of Jesus and moves quickly to the dramatic story of Pentecost, that day when the Spirit blew through a gathering of disciples and gave birth to the church. It continues with story after story of the Spirit’s ceaseless efforts to shape this community, and the church’s struggle to keep up with God’s expanding vision.

Today, we celebrate Pentecost—an annual opportunity to welcome the Spirit, to let go of our closely guarded sense of decency and order, to open the windows of the church so that the Holy One can again breathe new life into these old bones.

It all started with Peter—that sturdy disciple singled out by Jesus to lead the nascent movement centered on the message of resurrection and hope for a new world defined by love. Those who write and teach about leadership often highlight the ability to respond to “adaptive challenges.” I’ve done quite a bit of reading on the topic over the last year. Well, Peter was an adaptive leader before there were podcasts on the topic. Over and over again, he must respond to the stirring of the Holy Spirit. He must make consequential decisions without all the information. His firmly entrenched principles and deeply held convictions are repeatedly put to the test. His experience is a witness to the disruptive, chaotic, life-changing, freeing, unencumbered power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit is not captive to our powers of deduction. We cannot predict, plan, or prepare for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit just shows up.

Just before this morning’s passage, Peter has experienced a previously unimaginable change. A

divine vision and an encounter with a Roman officer unsettle his perception of the limits of God’s grace. The sermon that he preaches displays his stunned reaction to this experience. The whole message flows from what is a radically new confession for Peter: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” Now you talk about an adaptive challenge! Peter has spent his entire life believing that God *does* show partiality. In fact, Peter’s understanding of God is rooted in God’s partiality. Partiality to the chosen ones, partiality to the inner circle of disciples, partiality to those born under the promises of God, given the law and the covenant. Peter’s most deeply held belief was of a God who was devoted to one group of people, namely his. Peter has been given a new understanding, a new picture of God’s expansive grace. In other words, Peter has come to believe more in the Holy Spirit than in his carefully constructed theology.

Here’s how it happens. His transformation begins on the day of Pentecost. There, in the middle of the holy city, the Spirit of God descends on a diverse gathering of people. They are gathered from all nations, tongues, backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives. Peter recognizes this moment for what it is. It’s what the author Kurt Vonnegut calls a chrono-synclastic infundibulum. And he finds words in Scripture from the prophet Joel that fit the occasion: “In those days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” That’s how Peter interprets Pentecost. It also creates a number of adaptive challenges. And then, he gets to work building the church of Jesus Christ: preaching and teaching, caring for the poor and the sick, serving the community, proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed. At this point, his ministry is to his own people: fellow Jews who know the law and the prophets, who keep the commandments and are rooted in the tradition.

For nine chapters that's the way the Gospel message spreads. It all changes in chapter ten, when a messenger of God visits a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion living in Caesarea. A Gentile. The messenger tells Cornelius to search for a man called Peter. Meanwhile, across town, as Peter is praying, he too has a vision: a vision of God breaking down the boundaries that separated Jews from Gentiles. To his shock and surprise, Peter is commanded to eat food that he had been taught was unclean. When he protests, the voice of God responds to him with powerful words about more than food: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The words are so important—and so surprising—that they are repeated three times. Peter is then told to search for a man named Cornelius and, when the two do meet, Peter describes the transformation he has experienced: "You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile: but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Imagine the headlines! Leader of the Christian-Jewish movement breaks the commandments of God, associates with a Gentile *in public!*

It is at this point that Peter speaks the words we just heard—both a proclamation of the Gospel *and* a personal witness to transformation. God shows no partiality.

What if we believed this was true? Or, more pointedly, what if we who believe this acted like it? Each time we recite the ancient creeds of the church, we say these words, "I believe in the Holy Ghost..." Maybe we should whisper them—who knows what might happen...how we might be asked to change? How might it change your life, or the life of our church, to worship and serve an impartial God? Talk about an adaptive challenge!

I love what happens next. While Peter is still preaching—surprise. The Spirit of God comes to *all* who heard the word—Jew and Gentile, man and woman, insider and outsider, believer and skeptic, clean and unclean, sophisticated and simple, all, all, all. Those insiders who had come with Peter from Jerusalem are astounded, shocked, blown away by the Spirit of God given to Gentiles. But Peter knows just what to do. He adjusts. He stops the sermon. In fact, this half-finished homily is the last speech he gives

in the Book of Acts. Can we withhold the baptismal waters for those whom God's Spirit has claimed? The answer is obvious. These outsiders are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The church is set on a new course. All because Peter, our model of adaptive leadership, dared to believe in the Holy Spirit, the One who can change hearts, expand visions, and transform even the most made-up of minds.

If we're honest, we must confess that the church has not often excelled in adaptation. Some have called us the caboose of movements for change, lagging far behind out of abundant caution, institutional weight, or basic fear. But history does not determine destiny and the Spirit is still out there, and in here, prodding us. Consider the last year, a time of swift and constant change, and how the church has rapidly and faithfully responded to uncertainties of every kind. Together, we've found new ways to do what the church has always done—worship, proclaim the Gospel, care for one another, reach out to those in need, commit what we have to Christ's mission. Have we been challenged? Has our faith been tested? Has our unity been stretched? Have we struggled to bear one another's burdens? You bet. At the risk of a laughable understatement, it's been a trying year.

A pastor friend of mine recently referred to himself as the congregation's chief anxiety officer. It's the title I take on most in the early morning hours under the assault of uncertainty. What does the future hold? Will people come back to church? How do we balance reasonable risk with concern for the vulnerable? Can our patience with each other outpace our pride? Will we regain lost momentum...resources...energy? How much change is too much change, and how little is not enough? Do I have what it takes for what comes next? What has been lost? Who has been lost?

In my clearer or wiser moments, I turn my focus not inward, but outward. I recall your extraordinary commitment in exasperating times. Your willingness to take the next right step even when we cannot see the whole staircase. Your grace in difference, your unity in Christ, your focus on what matters most. Then I recall the witness of Christ-followers throughout time and around the globe, given what Marilynne Robinson has

called “prevenient courage”—that gift of the Spirit that goes before us and makes us brave enough to follow. And, I reflect on the bold vision and fearless leadership of our ancestors in Acts, who believed in the Holy Spirit enough to accept the gift of change and lay the foundation of the church.

And when I do this, I am blessed by the realization that the weight of the world, or the church, does not rest on my shoulders. I am freed to release my grip and let go of control. Somewhat paradoxically, this letting go enables adaptive leadership. It opens the way to courageous and faithful living. Beloved, let us never allow anxiety to overwhelm trust in the Spirit of God, already ahead of us, moving, equipping, inspiring, calling to us to follow.

This is our charge, Second Church. Leave space for God’s Spirit to continue the work of transformation here. Long-time members, first-time worshippers, sideline spectators, whether you are filled with faith or spiritually empty, fully engaged, deeply frustrated with the church (and its pastor), or not sure where you stand, this is my instruction: allow the Spirit of God to move through your life, bringing gentleness and restlessness, comfort and challenge, transformations of every kind. There is no door shut too tightly for the Holy Spirit to enter, no heart too hardened, no mind too closed, for the Spirit of the Living God to fall afresh, descend on us all.

If we believe in the Holy Spirit, we will let go of control and be free to serve and live and love with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength.

If we believe in the Holy Spirit, hope will outshine fear and faith will overcome despair.

If we believe in the Holy Spirit, the future of our church is bright because it is not ultimately in our hands.

My friend Tom Long once told a story that I have rehearsed in my mind regularly ever since—almost nightly in the last year. I offer it as a word of comfort and assurance to all of us who bear the weight of the moment. He spoke of a man named Angelo Roncalli, we remember him as Pope John XXIII, who led the

Catholic Church through a period of radical and rapid change, unlike anything the church had seen in centuries. In every corner, there was fear and anxiety that the church was going to come apart at the seams from such revolutionary reshaping. Each night, before he went to bed, he would say his prayers, read Scripture, keep silence. Then as he reached to turn out the light, he would say to himself, “Who runs the church? You, or the Holy Spirit? Go to sleep, Angelo. Go to sleep.”ⁱ

Come, Holy Spirit. Give us the courage to follow, to accept, to welcome, to change, to believe. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, “The Faith that Looks Forward,” preached at Morningside Presbyterian Church, January 17, 2010.