

Pentecost Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
23 May 2021

John, Acts 2:1-11

I have an illustration to speak about the Holy Spirit. It comes from Lutheran Pastor Brian Stoffregen in his excellent exegetical notes. The illustration is that of gasoline. You can use gasoline in a variety of ways, but two ways help us understand the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Imagine that you have ten gallons of gasoline in a container, and you throw a lit match at it. You will get a powerful explosion that can consume everything around it. Now, imagine that you put those ten gallons into a car and allow the engine to burn the gasoline in a controlled burn. The result is that you can travel over two hundred miles on those ten gallons.

The Holy Spirit works in the first way, as we see in the reading from Acts today. On the day of Pentecost, he exploded into the scene. The disciples saw tongues of fire, they were all moved to the core, and shaken to their foundation. They started at that point to preach the Gospel boldly and courageously. Prior to this event the frightened disciples were hiding in locked places for fear of the authorities. After this event, they were “on-fire.” They began to preach the Gospel with such enthusiasm and conviction that people thought they were “drunk with new wine.” After this event, a purely local and somewhat exclusive enterprise becomes a universal church, as thousands of people from many different countries understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language and take that message with them when they go back home. The Holy Spirit burst into the earthly stage and a young local church became the vehicle through which God shared with the world the Good News of his Son, Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the human race.

The Holy Spirit also works in the second way, as we see in the reading from John today. In his farewell speech from which we have been reading these last few Sundays, Jesus promises that after he has ascended to heaven, he will send the “Paraclete” to his disciples. The literal translation of “Paraclete” is “one who comes alongside.” Some have used it in a legal sense as someone who speaks for someone else, from which we get the word “Counselor.” But we should not understand the Holy Spirit as a “Counselor” in the sense of one who gives us advise or in the sense of a defense attorney.

I personally like the expression, “One who comes alongside,” and one who accompanies us in our journey. In this case, the Holy Spirit works like the slow burn of Gasoline. He is that steady source of power who is “with us forever” (John 14:16); who “teaches and reminds us of Jesus' words” (John 14:26); who “testifies and witnesses on Jesus' behalf” (John 15:26); and who “proves the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:7-11). The Holy Spirit comes alongside the believers and gives them the courage to endure as they are hated by the same world that hated Jesus (John 15:18); a world to which they do not belong (John 15:19); and which will persecute them as they persecuted Jesus (15:20.) “One role of the Paraclete is to be the presence of

God/Jesus with the community. That presence is needed because they are being hated and persecuted by the world” (Stoffregen, “Exegetical Notes”, www.crossmarks.com). The Holy Spirit is the great explosion that has the power to ignite a lifesaving belief in Christ (which is what I believe happens at Baptism), and the Holy Spirit is also the slow burn that allows us to initiate our journey of faith, that protects us from the “Evil One,” and that feeds us spiritually along the way.

The Holy Spirit does not place himself at the center of the stage, does not testify about himself, and does not witness to his own power. Rather, the Holy Spirit is like the stage lights that remain hidden during the production, but which illuminate and point to the main character in the story, which is Christ. The Theologian J. I. Packer states,

“The Spirit's message to us is never, ‘look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me,’ but always, ‘look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.’ The Spirit, we might say, is the matchmaker, the celestial marriage broker, whose role it is to bring us and Christ together and ensure that we stay together” (James Packer, “Your Father Loves You.” Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.)

Imagine that you are walking on the perilous and dark road of life. Now imagine that the Holy Spirit is walking right behind you pointing a flashlight over your shoulder, allowing you to see the road ahead, to identify the roadblocks so you may avoid them, and to keep you on the right path or to help you to get on the right path when you lose your way. Now, imagine that in addition to allowing you to see the light, the Holy Spirit also bears testimony about Christ. He whispers in your ear, “Remember that he loves you, remember that he is the way, remember that he is the truth, remember that he died for you, and remember that no one comes to the Father except through him.” Now, in addition to giving testimony about Christ, imagine that the Holy Spirit also holds a compass, and it is constantly guiding us in the right way to go. Without the Holy Spirit's guidance, we would be lost, out of course, walking around in circles, doomed to perish. But the Holy Spirit is there, walking alongside us, carefully pointing the way we should go. As Martin Luther puts it:

“I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day, he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true” (Taken from Stoffregen, Ibid).

My friends we often oppose the Holy Spirit and reject his offer of protection and his empowering gifts. We often refuse his offer of forgiveness, and his free gift of grace.

We believe we know the way and we do not need a guide. We want to be self-sufficient and need no one to hold the flashlight for us or to tell us which way to go. We become so set in our ways that rather than asking God's Holy Spirit, "Which way shall I go," we tell the Holy Spirit which way the Spirit should go. We fail to open ourselves up to the amazing possibilities God may have in store for us. We become so intimidated by change that we deny the Holy Spirit the opportunity to transform us and to transform our church in new and amazing ways. We tell God's Holy Spirit, "You can come, but only if we go the way I want to go; and you are to refrain from all that Christ talk; and you are only to give me the gifts I want; and please do not disturb the predictable and comfortable pattern of my life; and do not ask me to do anything I do not want to do; and please understand that there are people I do not like and that's never going to change; and would you please do something about this traffic?"

If we open ourselves up to God's possibilities and let God's Holy Spirit come alongside us to guide our lives and to point them in Christ's direction, the Holy Spirit will unleash his amazing power in our lives and will make us contagious, courageous, and transforming Christians.

I invite all of you today to allow this great power to transform your lives. Amen!