

Snapshots of the Spirit

Acts 2:1-8, 12-21 Crossroads Christian Church
John 20:19-23 Caseyville, IL
Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015

It's Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Older Disciples, Independent, and Church of Christ buildings alike sometimes have something like this on their cornerstone: "Built 1897. Established 33 AD." That's to express their sense of continuity with the church of the New Testament. That 33 AD is referring to Pentecost, which was usually a Jewish early harvest festival, but on that year, something spectacular happened. Followers of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ had gathered together, and God's Spirit came upon them, the Gospel was preached, people believed, and a church was born. Ironically, Disciples sometimes don't pay much attention to the Holy Spirit. We're laid back folk, and speaking in tongues seems, well, too Pentecostal. But there's more to the Holy Spirit than that. So I thought that today maybe we could use our imaginations a bit to review what the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is really all about.

Picture, if you will, in your mind's eye, that you're on a tour of Heaven. You are welcomed into a room in our Father's Mansion, a living room. In this living room, see a coffee table. On that coffee table, there's a lovely old photo album, slightly worn at the edges, with gilded lettering—The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has its own photo album! You reach down and open it. It must be okay, God wouldn't have left it out if you weren't supposed to look at it.

The photo on the first page looks out of focus, just swirly, gray nothing. For a second you wonder if God's thumb slipped over the lens, but you know that such a thing couldn't happen. Then you see a title underneath, a scripture reference, Genesis 1:1-2. You remember it. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth

was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." Ah! No wonder the picture was fuzzy—it was meant to be that way. It was chaos, formless nothing. God's Spirit moved over it—brooded over it, like a mother hen—prepared it for the act of creation, for the forming of worlds and galaxies, of skies and oceans, of plants and animals, and of human beings.

The next photo shows a form bent lovingly over another. A parent and a child, you might think. Then you wonder if it's someone giving another artificial respiration. It's God, breathing life into the lifeless lump of clay that came to be Adam. God breathed Spirit—breath—ruach in Hebrew—all the same word-- into the first human, and he came to life.

You flip through the pages. God's Spirit called Moses through the burning bush. God's Spirit inspired prophets to preach. Then you see another strange photo, blurred around the edges, of nothing but bones. A chill runs up your back. Ezekiel, one of the prophets, saw such a vision after his nation had been carried off into captivity in Babylon. It was a vision of a valley of dried bones, the gruesome remains of a great battle. Can these bones live? God asked. "O Lord God, only you know," said the prophet. Ezekiel was commanded to prophesy to the bones. The Spirit moved like the wind, the bones clattered, and took on ligaments and flesh, and came to life. It was a vision to show Ezekiel that his people in exile, dead to their old ways of life, could find new life with God's help.

Another photo shows the prophet Joel promising that on the Day of the Lord the Spirit would be poured out, that old people would dream dreams, and the young would see visions.

Then we see a photo of people near the river Jordan. Jesus Christ was being baptized by John the Baptist, and God's

Spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of God said, "This is my Son, my Beloved. In him I am well pleased."

Jesus would call disciples, and they would learn from him. Then, when the time of his own death was near, he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our Gospel reading, then, shows us the picture of the risen Christ giving the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit as he commissioned them to serve.

Then came Pentecost—a great Jewish festival, a time when large crowds took pilgrimages to Jerusalem in honor of the harvest festival, fifty days after Passover—and for the disciples, fifty days after the resurrection of their Lord Jesus Christ. One photo here shows that the disciples had gathered, back in the upper room where they had observed the Last Supper. Now, with a large gathering of followers, you note that their hair is being blown about, and the hems of their robes are flapping in the wind that's bursting through the room. This wind was like the one which had brooded over creation; then suddenly it was as if tongues of flame gathered over the disciples' heads—then everyone had the gift of understanding, so they could hear the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then you see a picture of Peter, preaching to the crowds that have gathered outside. The one who less than two months before had denied knowing Jesus was now boldly proclaiming the gospel. You can see in his face joy, power, conviction, truth. These are scenes from the birthday of the church.

This is the Spirit which is still with us today, the Spirit which draws us to Jesus Christ, the Spirit that brings us gifts, gifts that we can use to share God's love with one another today—gifts of preaching; teaching; service; exhortation; stewardship; helpfulness; mercy. This is the Spirit whose fruits are shown in the way we live—the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is the Spirit that prays with

us and for us; when we can't say the words, the Spirit prays for us in sighs too deep for words.

But you flip a page on the album and then you're surprised. The next photo you recognize in the album isn't a Bible scene at all. It is your own baptism photo. Then you remember the minister's baptizing you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, welcoming you into new life in Jesus Christ. The last photo you see is you today, sitting here in church, and the people around you. For God's Spirit is in you; God's Spirit wants to work through you, so that you might be a blessing to the whole world. That's what God's Spirit does. It works within you and among you, but only as you allow it to do so, so that you can be an apostle, like those at the first Pentecost, and share the good news with others—through your words, your deeds, and your attitudes—that Christ is alive; that God is in our midst. Let the Spirit be at work in us. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon