

Ghost

Sermon text: Acts 2:1-4

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I. Sensing the supernatural

You might notice that my nose, ears, and neck are still a bit pink this morning. My dad, my son Will, and I got to play golf on Friday and it was a sunny day. I played my usual mediocre round, but got plenty of sun. It's not hard to recognize, is it? We can see when someone has spent too much time in the sun.

Sometimes it's another of our senses that helps us figure out what's going on. Our daughter, Kate, has an amazing nose. She has her mother's finely tuned sense of smell. When Kate was growing up and I would give her a hug when I got home from church in the evening, she would bury her nose in my shoulder and could often tell by the smell of my shirt where I'd been for lunch. Sometimes it got me in trouble if I'd eaten at one of her favorite restaurants: "Dad, did you go to Moe's today without me?" Kate's nose knows Moe's.

Another example is our sense of hearing. What we hear helps us make sense of what's happening. We have some good friends who are pastors in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Some of you have met David and Mairisine. They are wonderful people. But when my wife, Cindy, has been around them for a while, she starts to talk like they do. So if you hear Cindy say something like, "I'm feeling a wee bit peckish because it's past tea time," you know she's been around our Irish friends. You can hear it in the way she talks.

Today we are completing this year's study of God's story in the Bible and how our story as followers of Jesus is connected to it. We began in September in the book of Genesis with Noah, the flood, and God's promise to preserve his people. We conclude this morning with Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit with power on Jesus' disciples as they gathered in the upper room. It is obvious in our text how the disciples knew the Holy Spirit was present. They heard the sound of a rushing wind. They saw divided tongues of fire resting above each other. And they received supernatural power to speak languages they had not learned so the Jews gathered in Jerusalem from around the world for Pentecost could hear the gospel in their own language. Their senses made it clear that God was doing something new and different.

But what about us – how can we, as Christians, tell that the Spirit lives within us? I mean, I can hear a little bit of wind blowing, but I suspect that it's the air-conditioning. I see some folks dressed in red for Pentecost, but there are no tongues of flame resting on any heads that I've noticed. How about you? As I said, our senses help us understand what's going on around us and even within us. So what are the signs that we are in the presence of the Holy Spirit? What does it look like? What does it smell like? How does it sound?

There are some Christian traditions that emphasize spectacular indications of the Spirit's presence: speaking in tongues, fits of holy laughter, dancing with unbridled joy, or being physically knocked down or "slain in the Spirit." I don't criticize these brothers and sisters in Christ who focus on outward signs of the Spirit's presence. It is not our place to think or speak badly about followers of Jesus who express their faith a bit differently than we do.

It is our place to learn from those who have gone before us in our Reformed tradition when it comes to matters of the Spirit. For us, it is important to be firmly grounded in God's Word as we seek to understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

II. Spirit as sunshine

So we read the Old Testament and understand how God first revealed himself to his people as the Creator of all that is, as the covenant-maker with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, as the “Great I Am” who spoke to Moses from within the burning bush, as the Law-Giver who inscribed on tablets of stone the best ways for his people to live, and as the one who promised a Messiah from the line of King David. Especially after our study of God’s story in the Bible this year, we’ve learned how the Lord helped his people understand him.

We’ve also read through much of the New Testament this year, so we get it when it comes to Jesus. It’s clear that the gospel writers want us to see the connection between the Jewish expectation of a Messiah and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. There are lots of passages, especially in the gospel of Matthew, that go out of their way to point out that Jesus said this or did that in order to fulfill what Messiah was supposed to say or do. And in the gospel of John, Jesus says some things that are unmistakable claims to being God. We have an understanding of Jesus as God the Son.

But it’s the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit – that can be so much harder to figure out. I used to think that the Jews major on the God of our Old Testament. We Presbyterians and other Protestants focus on Jesus. And the Pentecostals and other charismatics deal with the Holy Spirit. It didn’t help that some analogies for understanding the Trinity weren’t very helpful for me. You may have heard the one about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as water, ice, and steam. The problem is we believe that God exists eternally in three persons with one divine essence, and that’s not true for water, ice, and steam. It doesn’t exist in those different states at one time. God does.

It wasn’t until I went off to seminary and had a chance to study a little about St. Augustine that God’s self-revelation in three persons made sense. For me, the best analogy for God, who has revealed himself in the Bible as Trinity, is the sun – the exploding mass of hydrogen at the center of our solar system. The sun itself is analogous to God the Father – its presence is undeniable. The light from the sun is what we can see. It is analogous to Jesus – God the son. Jesus is the person of the Godhead we humans have seen, like the light from the sun. But there is also energy that comes from the sun. That energy is not directly visible, but it is the force that is the key to photosynthesis – bringing life and growth to plants. That energy from the sun is analogous to the Holy Spirit. All three – the planet itself, the light we can see, and the energy that comes from it are properly called “the sun” at the same time. Similarly, God is at once Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – one God, three persons – distinct but not divided.

III. Seeing the Spirit

There may be some of us who find this talk about spiritual stuff disconcerting. It makes us worry that this “Spirit” person might move in and kind of take over – sort of like being possessed the way you see in the movies. Possessed people say creepy things. They act in bizarre ways. In the movies, when a spirit takes over, it makes people someone they’re not.

But that’s not at all what it’s like when the Spirit of Christ dwells in your heart. God’s Spirit has been called “The Helper” and he does just that – helps us to be who we truly are at the deepest level. God is the one who created us. It is his desire for us to become fully the person the Lord intends us to be. Inviting the Spirit to live inside us has nothing to do with being possessed and everything to do with discovering our purpose and living with power beyond our own.

During his last supper with his disciples, this is what Jesus said in John 16:7, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away,

the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” After telling his followers many troubling things about betrayal and denial and death, Jesus said to them that it would be better for them if he went away.

What the Master was saying was that as long as he continued in his earthly ministry, he was constrained by certain limitations. He could only be in relationship with a few people at a time. His voice could only carry far enough to teach those who were nearby. He could only heal the relatively few people who were brought to him. But, when Jesus went away, when death released him from the constraints of his body, he promised to send the Spirit to continue and expand his ministry.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to dwell within the hearts of those who love and trust the Lord. This Spirit of truth is the continuing source of guidance and wisdom and power from God. The Holy Spirit is not subject to the limitations of the incarnate Christ; rather, it is the wind of God that blows into the hearts and minds of those who follow Jesus.

Friends, it is possible for someone to profess Christian faith, read the Bible, attend church, but not invite the Holy Spirit to take up residence in his or her heart and mind. What that means is that we can have the external indications of being a Christian, but we live life in our own power and with our own wisdom. In other words, we are less than God intends us to be because the work of the Holy Spirit is to guide us and to give us wisdom and power beyond our own, like the disciples displayed on the day of Pentecost.

But how can we know when the Holy Spirit is present? What are some indications that God is truly at work in our life? First, let me admit that I am far from an expert. I often feel like a child in the faith when it comes to matters of the Spirit. There are saints in this church family who are more in tune with the movement of the Spirit than I am. But one thing I have learned is that there is something about music offered in praise and worship that opens us up to the Holy Spirit. It’s more of a sense or a feeling than anything else, but we know God is present.

I can also remember times when I have been sitting in worship, listening to a sermon, and I had the distinct impression that the preacher was speaking directly to me. He or she couldn’t have know what had gone on in my life the previous week, or what was going through my mind the day before, but somehow the message dealt with that very issue – my issue. Maybe you’ve had something similar happen. That’s the Spirit at work.

We know when we’re reading scripture in our devotional time and a word or passage seems to “shimmer” that the Holy Spirit is present. When we are in conversation with someone and we have a “gut” level sense of what is going beneath the surface of his or her life – the Spirit is likely at work. When we are tuned in to the spiritual reality around us and within us, we begin to recognize that the Holy Spirit is present.

So what do you think? Is it just the air-conditioning, or could it be a wind from God blowing through our church family? Is the red we see just the clothing some of us chose for Pentecost, or are there tongues of flame burning here at Church of the Palms? I wonder what would happen if we expected to see the presence and power of the Spirit of the risen Christ at work today and every day? I wonder...