

The Spirit Like a Dove
John 1:29-34
Troy Taylor
First Baptist Church, Lethbridge
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Many years ago, a friend of mine was starting to get into a more charismatic church, and I decided to go with him to a worship service. The practice in this church was that, following the service, you could go up and receive prayer ministry. So, I decided to go and be prayed for.

I was not expecting what took place!

The pastor, a man named Craig, sat with me, and we were silent for a few minutes. Then he proceeded to tell me a few things about myself.

He said that God was saying that my submission to God was not in question. I knew the sovereignty of the Father. My conviction of the Son as my Lord and saviour was absolute. But I barely knew the Holy Spirit.

Then he told me that he saw me in a field, trying to get to a giant oak tree. But some guy with an air nail gun was building a fence around the tree, and no matter how fast I went, even ran, the guy was too fast, and the fence always grew in front of me. Nothing was as important as getting to that tree, but it was impossible. Craig told me that the minute that I stopped running and trying to beat the fence, I would find myself sitting at rest, content beneath that great, ancient oak.

This was my first experience with someone praying prophetically into my life, and I tell you, it was a bullseye. I desperately wanted to learn how to do this, but the, dare I say it in a Baptist church, vision Craig had told me was clear – I could not race after the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would come to me.

That sounds biblical!

Once again, we turn our eyes towards the dusty wilderness of the Middle East, and in the valley of the Jordan, John the Baptist is baptizing people to prepare them to encounter the living God, and the Kingdom that they've been waiting for over centuries.

One of those baptisms was quite a shock. Jesus himself, John's cousin, but as yet unknown by John as the Messiah, gets baptized. Two things happen when Jesus comes out of the muddy water. A voice speaks from heaven, and a bird lands on him.

Standing there in that place, all people have in their minds the original crossing of the Jordan, the moment when, after forty years of wandering lostness, the nation of Israel took her first steps into her inheritance. A voice booms out over the running water, and people picture the

stories of their childhood, heard in their mother's voices, of the Spirit of God, hovering over the deep, dark chaos of the waters, and God speaking, "Let there be. . ."

The dove appears, and floats gently down onto John's cousin Jesus, and another ancient story is brought to mind. Noah first sent out a raven from the ark, a hardy bird that would fly for hours and hours in the direction of land, even if it was out of sight. But then he sent out a dove, a more fragile bird, who would always return to safety if a suitable landing site and nesting place is unavailable. When the dove stays in place, Noah knows that God's cleansing of the earth is over, the chaos is once again reigned in, and God's creation can be filled once again with life.

Can you imagine all of this racing through John's head as it happens mere feet away from him? The moment of creation, when life became available for the first time. The end of God's judgement for the sins of humanity. The place of nesting and refuge is where the dove remains. All in the place where God forged his nation after years of lostness.

It is no wonder that the sign that John was told to look for was the dove landing on Jesus. This is Messiah, the anointed one, who will end Israel's exile, and establish God's kingdom.

Wow!

All four gospels tell this story. The place, the voice, the bird. But it isn't any bird, it is the very Holy Spirit, falling on Jesus. How, then, does Jesus understand the Spirit landing on him?

The voice comes straight out of Psalm 2, the psalm read at coronations:

**"I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain."**

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:

**He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father.**

**Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession."**

The Spirit remaining on Jesus means that Jesus is a judge. Isaiah 11:1-4a says,

**"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.**

**The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,**

**the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.**

**He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”**

But he will also not be a judge and king who wields power like humans do. Instead, he will be a ruler with justice and mercy, a champion of the weak and forgotten. Isaiah 42:1-4 says,

**“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”**

Jesus knew all of this. Of course, he is God! But the Spirit was the sign that told John who Jesus was, and Jesus explained it even more clearly as soon as he began to speak in the synagogue. In his first recorded message in Luke, he quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 saying,

**“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion. . .”**

This little detail, the Holy Spirit’s presence at Jesus’ baptism, is so often overlooked, or reduced to a proof of the trinity, the mystery that God is three individuals yet one God.

But it is so much more than that. It is no less than the happening, the proof that centuries old prophecy was true, that God indeed would rescue his people. Isaiah 64:1 says,

**“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!”**

The heavens open, and God’s kingdom has begun. Matthew and Mark summarize the longer sermon Jesus gave in Luke, saying instead,

“The time has come,” he said. **“The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”** (Matt 3:17, Mark 1:15). Not prepare for the future kingdom, not wait for it, but look and see the Kingdom of God among you! It is here!

Fast forward three years, and Jesus says in John 16 that when Jesus returns to the Father’s side, he will send the very same Spirit to rest on us, his church, his kingdom people.

This is amazing.

We are part of the same prophecy that foretold Jesus as the Messiah. Our story of the church cannot ever be separated from the ancient God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who called Moses, who spoke through Isaiah, who established his kingdom in Jesus.

We have the authority of the king to do what he did, in the same manner as he did. Not with shouting and force of power, but with binding, healing, comfort, and peace.

We can know the very mind of God, as Paul helps us understand in 1 Corinthians 2:10b-13: **“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.”**

Our world tells us that if you are hearing voices, then you need to take some medication to get them to stop. And yet, biblical Christians believe that God speaks to his people, and we can know his thoughts through the Holy Spirit! Just like me twenty years ago in a charismatic service, I think that many churches today are solid in their understanding of the Father and the Son, but we barely know the Holy Spirit! So, then, what do we do? How do we learn?

First, we need to be clear – the Spirit is God, we are not. We cannot do anything to coerce, manipulate, or force the Spirit to show up and speak. The Holy Spirit is not a trained dog to sit and bark at our command or effort. That said, there are things we need to be doing that cultivate a posture of listening and hearing.

We need to be right with God. This means that we need to be in full submission to Jesus and his authority in our lives as God. We cannot willingly hold on to sin and then expect the Holy Spirit to be clear in our minds. Incidentally, we will begin to learn the voice of God as we listen to him convict us of our sin!

Second, we need to give up our most precious commodity – time. The disciples were told to wait until they had received the spirit, and so they did. Acts 1:4 **“On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”** So, they did. Acts 2 tells of this waiting. We need to spend time meditating on scripture, and in prayer. Waiting, unorganized, and without agenda.

Finally, we learn to listen to the Holy Spirit in community, from those who are further along in the journey than we are. Peter sees the Holy Spirit in the home of Cornelius, and then teaches them, leading them to be baptized. On hearing that the Gentile churches had received the Holy Spirit, the council of Jerusalem sent people and letters, instructing the believers on how to grow in this faith, and in fellowship with the whole church.

I remember being assigned to a prayer team during Urbana, a global mission conference, in 2006. The prayer shifts were three hours long. I had no idea what to do with that, so my plan was to find a corner of the room, pray for as long as I could (I figured about five or so minutes), and then wait and see what happened.

I walked in the door, and I was the last one to arrive. One of the others looked up, having never met me before, and said,

“Oh good! You’re here. You’re planning to sit in the corner and pray for a few minutes, and then wait and see what happens. God says that won’t work. You’re going to be hearing from the Holy Spirit, and you will need to share what you hear with us, because you will be the one who initiates many of our prayer times.”

No pressure, right?

That team was very gracious, helping me learn the difference between my own thoughts and the words of the Holy Spirit. But it was also uncomfortable. I had to begin praying out loud, in a group. I had to spend long hours in quiet, reading scripture, and listening. It took time to build up endurance. But it happened. Over the week, that team disciplined me in listening to the Holy Spirit.

Learning to listen to the Holy Spirit is not easy, nor is it instantaneous. It is a process of submission, and commitment to a lifetime of desiring God. It is also ultimately mysterious – we can’t do anything to force God’s hand to gift us, only place ourselves in a posture to receive him, and cultivate the habits that facilitate spiritual awareness and growth.

Over the course of the summer, as we preach on the spirit, we need to develop the space to listen and hear. We pray with John the revelator, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Benediction:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said. . .

May you go in the anointing and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, so that you may hear clearly what God says to you.

Amen