

We Need to Talk About Peter (Acts 2)

Sunday, June 12, 2022

We are scared of the Holy Spirit.

Generally, we're comfortable with Jesus. He's our shepherd, our friend, he sacrifices all on our behalf, and his teaching is exceptional.

We're comfortable with God the Father. Or even if some baggage in our life makes "Father" a difficult description for God, we're comfortable with the idea of "God the Parent". God as Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all.

But God the Holy Spirit? We're not so comfortable with that. In traditions like ours we don't quite know what to do with the Holy Spirit. We like our control and our order and our well-thought-out beliefs. And the Holy Spirit at times seems to be a threat to that control and order.

We are scared of the Holy Spirit. And I think we are scared of the Holy Spirit because we are scared of the people that make a big deal of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has been attributed to everything from making people bark like dogs and make animal noises. People speak of being "slain in the Spirit" – the Holy Spirit overtaking them, possessing them and leaving them incapacitated. The Holy Spirit had been said to come upon people and make them speak in tongues – in a language that neither they nor anyone else around them understands. The Holy Spirit has been credited by those who make a big deal of the Holy Spirit with some outlandish and frankly chaotic things.

Let me be clear – I'm not going to fold my arms in judgement and say, "That's not the Holy Spirit". None of what I described is anything I've experienced of the Holy Spirit, but I'm not going to tell someone that their more flamboyant experience is not connected to the Holy Spirit.

But I will say that these things scare other believers away from the idea of the Holy Spirit. As a result, when people talk about the Holy Spirit, we shrug our shoulders and say, "I dunno."

I'm going to let you in on an insider secret. Do you want to know the most terrifying thing a person can tell a pastor? Are you sure? Here's the most terrifying thing as a pastor I've heard someone say to me:

"I'm going through a revival."

This sounds good, right? The Holy Spirit has entered their life and is motivating them to a bigger faith, a more intensive experience of God, a more purposeful life. These are things as pastors we want people to experience.

But whenever someone has informed me that they are going through a personal revival, this is what it really means:

- We need to do more church services. Big ones!
- I'm going to tell you and all the leaders of the church all the time what is wrong with the church.

- I'm going to examine every teaching so deeply that I'm bringing a list of criticisms about every sermon and every class.
- I'm going to be a lot more judge-y. But don't worry: I'm doing it because I love Jesus!

Basically, the fruit of "personal revival" looks like someone is going to be a persistent pain in the rear end.

Of course, we do want people to look at our sermons critically and not just brainlessly accept what we say. I do want to be confronted when I am out of line. I have the ability to make compromises that need to be corrected.

But when people tell me they are going through a personal revival and that the Holy Spirit is at work in them to make that revival happen, too often they mean, "Hang on tight, I'm about to be SUPER obnoxious!"

We are afraid of the Holy Spirit. Because we have encountered some of the people that make a big deal of the Holy Spirit, and we want nothing to do with THAT! We have seen how the Holy Spirit is embraced by impulsive and scattered people, and we don't need more anxiety or impulsiveness in our lives.

Impulsive and scattered describes perfectly how we encounter the disciple Peter in the Gospels. He gravitated to big moments, big ideas, bold declarations and big statements.

Here's a few Peter highlights:

- At the transfiguration, the appearance of Elijah and Moses alongside Jesus, Peter spoke up quickly. *Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened) (Mark 9:5-6)*
- When Jesus washed the disciples feet, making himself a servant to them, Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet. Jesus told Peter he could have not part of Jesus unless he let him do this. *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (John 13:9)*
- When Jesus warned the disciples that they would scatter when he was put on trial and crucified, *Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." (Matthew 26:33)*
- Jesus warned that this would specifically happen to Peter. *Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. (Matthew 26:35)*

"The Apostle Peter unnerves because he resembles me, like a brother from a different mother, like a spiritual dead ringer. We can both by turns be rash, dithering, cocky, cowering. We have a knack of leaping off the starting line and hobbling to the finish. We often say things we don't mean and mean things we don't say. The good we want to do we leave undone, and the evil we don't want to do we pratfall right into. We act swiftly, impetuously, many times disastrously, against our belter instincts. And then we fail to act at precisely those moment both wisdom and courage demand it. We think that saying something noble or valiant is the same thing as doing something noble or valiant. We cherish the

appearance of virtue, even if we lack the virtue itself. We can be, the two of us, eloquent and emphatic in our own defence, mumble mouthed in Jesus's defense." (Mark Buchanan, Hidden in Plain Sight)

We too easily come to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is for wacky, impulsive people. And Peter certainly seems to be another one of those wacky impulsive people.

So when the Holy Spirit arrives at Pentecost, appears on the believers like tongues of fire, and is spread through the streets of Jerusalem, how did this Holy Spirit affect wacky, impulsive Peter?

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and addressed the crowd. . . (Acts 2:14)

Peter gives a great sermon. The sermon is eloquent, measured, clear. What happened to wacky, spontaneous Peter? Where did the impulsive guy go? Who replaced this anxious erratic man with someone . . . calm?

The Holy Spirit certainly seems to disrupt things that are complacent, oppressive and controlled. There certainly seems to be that side of the Holy Spirit that is a trickster and that is unpredictable.

But where there is anxiety, chaos and fear, the Holy Spirit brings peace. And that is certainly what the Holy Spirit brings to Peter. The man is never the same again!

The images the Bible gives us of the Holy Spirit show us both the disruptive side of the Holy Spirit and the restoring side of the Holy Spirit. We have fire – very consuming. We have a dove – peaceful, calm. We have wind – which can be calming, empowering or wild. As Jesus taught, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8).

So it would seem that the Holy Spirit provides us with what we need in the situations where the Holy Spirit is needed. For a highly religious person, maybe the Holy Spirit needs to bother them. For the chaotic, impulsive, unsettled Peter, the Holy Spirit brought calming, measured, transformation.

So how do we know? How do we know what's the Holy Spirit and what's people being loopy? How do we know if the Holy Spirit is bringing calm or someone is being complacent?

We have this very helpful and familiar teaching from Paul, and this seems to be the most important Holy Spirit evidence:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23)

Pretty calming, unchaotic stuff. Depth of character stuff. Impossible, supernatural stuff.

The Holy Spirit takes erratic Peter – someone we too easily identify with in too many ways – and brings him calm and stability and he leads the early church into the most explosive time in their history.

Peter goes from the guy who "does not know what he is saying" to this person – "Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and addressed the crowd."