

September 25, 2022

Listen to what the Spirit says ...

Revelation 1

This Fall we'll be looking at the first few chapters of the book of Revelation. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus gives us seven letters to seven churches. On the one hand, these are seven specific Christian churches in a specific place and time, facing horrific persecution, the like of which we cannot imagine (1:4). Before we get to those letters, in Revelation 2-3, we need to put them in context. There is a Revelation, Chapter 1. We are spending a couple of Sundays thinking about some big themes introduced in Revelation 1:

- God the Father (September 11)
- Jesus the Son (September 18)

This morning, we focus on the Holy Spirit:

- *"This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace to you from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold **Spirit** before his throne; and from Jesus Christ ..."* (1:4-5)
- *"It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping **in the Spirit**. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea"* (1:10-11).

Several other times, in Revelation, John describes himself as "in the Spirit." Whenever John is "in the Spirit," he has another amazing vision (4:2, 17:3, 21:10).

As we look at the seven letters Jesus sends to seven churches, we'll see each letter is uniquely tailored to that specific church. But one phrase – and ONLY one phrase – is repeated to each and every church: *"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the **Spirit** and understand what he is saying to the churches"* (2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:1, 6, 13). It's important.

As people of God, we believe in God, our heavenly Father, our Creator, our Sustainer, our Provider. We believe in Jesus, also fully God and fully human, who lived, died, and rose from the dead, blessing us with forgiveness of our sins and life, now and forever. We also believe in the Holy Spirit, also fully God, personally present within each one of us. When we hear that small voice of God inspiring us to help another person – that's the Spirit. When we sense God's guidance to make a difference in His Kingdom – that's the Spirit. When we read Scripture and it speaks to us in new ways – that's the Spirit. When we pray and we have a clear sense of connecting with God – that's the Spirit.

Unless we're in a charismatic church, we may not be too sure how to talk about the Spirit. We talk a lot about Jesus. We talk about God. But we're not sure how to talk about the Spirit. Here are some helpful things to help us ...

The Spirit speaks to us through God's Word

We can hyper-spiritualize the Spirit. It's all spontaneous, mysterious and ethereal. The Spirit only speaks "in the moment." But the Spirit speaks to us through God's Word.

At one level, the Bible is just a collection of 750,000+ words. That's just a bit more than *The Lord of the Rings*. That's a bit less than the *Harry Potter* series. They're just words, right?

When I first began reading the Bible – a small old King James Bible my grandmother had given me – I sensed that these were not just ordinary words. It had nothing to do with the archaic English (I had already read Shakespeare, and Shakespeare didn't move me). As I read through God's Words, I was aware of a Presence, a Power, a Wisdom I couldn't account for in any other way than that God was with me as I read. The Spirit was speaking to me through Scripture. The Spirit can speak to us in profound ways through God's Word.

When I read Scripture now, I rarely have that same amazing sense of God's presence I did back then. But I still find God's Spirit speaking to me through His Word. I can read a familiar passage for the umpteenth time, and see some truth I never recognized before.

One passage I have found myself being led back to again and again is the story of Jesus dealing with a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Some legalistic religious men drag a woman to Jesus, wanting her severely punished (stoned to death) – the man, somehow, seems to get away. Jesus draws in the dust. As the religious men howl in outrage, eventually he says to her accusers, *"let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone."* They all leave, one by one, beginning with the eldest. In the end, it's just the woman and Jesus. He does deal with her issues, telling her, *"I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more."*

As we live in a culture where there are many, many people with issues – let's be honest, we all have issues – I ask myself, why is the Spirit bringing this story back to me, again and again. What is the Spirit saying to me? To us? In a world where evangelicals, in particular, have earned a reputation for legalism, judgment, anger, protest, and outrage ... I'm finding myself wrestling with what the Spirit is saying to me? To us? *"Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone."* How do I apply the example of Jesus I see here in my life? In our church? *"I don't condemn you."* In the end, Jesus – not the religious people – do deal with woman's issues. Can I let Jesus be the one who says, *"Go and sin no more"?*

*"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the **Spirit** and understand what he is saying to the churches"* – one key way we do that is through reading God's Word.

The Spirit speaks to us through our prayers

We can de-spiritualize the Spirit. God has only spoken through His Word and doesn't speak to us anymore.

In my experience, however, God is still very much alive, at work, and speaking into my life and into the lives of people around me. Often I am aware of the Spirit's leading through

prayer. Prayer is also just words. Or even thoughts. Or even mental images. And yet we know prayer is so much more. When we are (to use John's phrase) "in the Spirit," we feel in the very presence of God as we pray. We sense God's reality. We hear His voice. We understand His wisdom. We are moved by His reality.

To be honest, often when I pray, I don't have a strong sense of God's presence. It often does feel rather like it's me and the ceiling. But that's Ok. I know God hears my prayers, whether I "feel" Him or not. And there are those times when I really do sense the Spirit with me. So I draw strength from those times and hold on to them.

This has been a difficult couple of years for all of us. In the times when I can't sleep at night, I visualize themes of Scripture and prayerfully focus on them. For instance, I visualize my way through Psalm 23. Especially when I'm stressed or worried, one friend encouraged me to imagine myself coming to the cross, and holding on to the foot of the cross, for strength. After all, the cross is central to our faith. So I have done that. Recently, however, when I've imagined myself hanging on to the cross, I've heard a voice behind me, the voice of Jesus (see Revelation 1:10), saying, "Move on. I'm not on the cross anymore. I've moved on. I'm alive and doing things in the world. You need to come and join me where I am now."

It's a vision that has been repeated several times in recent months. I'm still trying to figure out what exactly Jesus is calling me to be doing. As I have shared this with godly friends, it seems the Spirit is saying something to me. What exactly? I'm not sure. But I keep praying that Jesus makes it clear. In the meantime, being passive isn't an option. I carry on.

*"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the **Spirit** and understand what he is saying to the churches"* – one key way we do that is through talking with God, in prayer.

The Spirit speaks to us through godly people

We can hyper-personalize the Spirit. God speaks to me and me alone. I can only experience the Spirit when I'm in private. We certainly CAN read Scripture, pray, worship, and know the reality of the Spirit in private. As an introvert, that's my default.

But in Scripture, people also often gather together to discern God's leading. Yes, individuals, alone, experience God's Spirit. But they also experience the Spirit in community. After Jesus ascended into heaven, as His disciples were trying to figure out what was next, *"They **all met together** and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus"* (Acts 1:14). Later, when the Holy Spirit came in power on Jesus' followers, *"On the day of Pentecost **all the believers were meeting together in one place**"* (Acts 2:1). Paul writes, *"Don't you realize that **all of you together** are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you (plural)?"* (1 Corinthians 3:16)

One of the amazing people through whom the Spirit has spoken to me has been Ruth Wyton, who, unfortunately, passed away on September 11. She had the gift of encouragement. For instance, since January 1 this year, alone, she has sent us as staff and/or me personally 21 emails of encouragement. That's the Spirit at work.

In some of Ruth's papers is a spiritual biography she writes about her life. She begins with this reflection. "*Selah*," she notes, "*is a Hebrew word that appears 72 times in the Psalms and 3 times in Habakkuk. The Webster and Smith Bible Dictionary tell us that it means pause or break and is most often associated with music. Many years ago a Bible Teacher suggested that in the Psalms it meant, 'think in that.'*" I rather like that explanation.

"In music, don't you just love when an orchestra plays and the drums roll and there is a pause – a selah, think on that – and the clash of cymbals. Or in an opera when a singer holds a note a long time and then suddenly all is quiet and again, selah – think on that. The Ten lepers waited – pause/think on that – they hurried to catch Jesus. Pause/think on that. Then they were healed. A blind man waited – pause/think on that – then yelled – pause/think on that – then was healed. The 120 in the Upper Room waited – pause/think on that – locked in and fearful – pause/think on that – then Pentecost."

Ruth had the gift of "pause/think on that." She modelled not being rushed. Not being swept up in busyness. As one person said, she had the gift of, when she was talking with you, giving you her undivided attention and making you feel like you were her only friend.

One key, Ruth modeled, is listening to the Spirit. Listening requires time. It requires uncluttered, unorganized time. Our lives are often so busy rushing here and there, we've scheduled out any time to genuinely listen. Maybe this is one blessing of being a person who has trouble sleeping: I have half the night to spend in prayer, trying to listen. (But maybe if I scheduled some listening time during the day, I'd sleep better at night!)

*"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the **Spirit** and understand what he is saying to the churches"* – one key way we do that is in community with God's people.

How are you at listening to God? Through Scripture? Through prayer? Godly friends?

For the next several weeks we'll unpack this in Revelation 2-3. But today, we've already heard some of what the Spirit is saying to us. The Spirit is telling us we are God's beloved Children. We are not condemned. He will deal with the issues in our lives. He always loves us. We have heard the Spirit telling us that Jesus is alive, moving, working in our world. Where do we see that? How can we be part of that? And we have heard the Spirit say that we need to pause. To take time. To think on that.

*"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the **Spirit ...**"* The Spirit of God is in this place. The Spirit of God is in your heart, mind, soul, and whole being every moment or every day. He is with you always. Will you take time to listen? To listen to what the Spirit is saying to you ...? To the churches?

Spirit of Christ, stir me;
Spirit of Christ, move me;
Spirit of Christ, fill me;
Spirit of Christ, seal me.

Seal my soul as Your own, that Your reflection in me may be a light for all to see ...

We beg You, all-merciful Father through Jesus, Your only-begotten Son,
made man for our sake, crucified and glorified for us,
to send upon us from Your treasure-house the Spirit:

the Spirit of wisdom,

enabling us to relish the fruit of the tree of life, which is indeed Yourself;

the Spirit of understanding:

to enlighten our perceptions;

the Spirit of prudence,

enabling us to follow in Your footsteps;

the Spirit of strength:

to withstand our adversary's onslaught;

the Spirit of knowledge:

to distinguish good from evil by the light of Your holy teaching;

the Spirit of holiness:

to clothe ourselves with charity and mercy;

the Spirit of faithfulness:

to withdraw from all ill-doing and live quietly in awe of Your eternal majesty..

These are the things for which we petition.

Grant them for the honor of Your holy name, to which,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory,
thanksgiving, praise, and lordship for ever and ever.

Amen.

Bonaventure, 1221-1274