

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Enlivened by the Spirit”
2nd in the series, *Becoming Like Christ*.
Acts 2:1-4
Pentecost Sunday
May 20, 2018

Last Sunday I laid out a simple, but challenging vision for us as a church. My hope for us is that at the core of our life together, we will be a community of people who are partnering with one another ***to become more like Christ.***

Not simply to know things about God and Jesus.

Not simply to do good deeds in the world.

Not simply to learn right from wrong.

But to cultivate lives that are becoming more like Christ.

... that ongoing work, ***that life-long work of becoming the aroma of Christ***, as I put it last week.

Because I’m more and more convinced that at the core of the church’s calling is the work of spiritual formation... which is a bit different than discipleship, and missions, and worship, and hospitality. All those are things we need to do, but spiritual formation is about who we are becoming.

In fact, I’m going to repeat my simple definition of spiritual formation because I want it to sink in for us as a church. Spiritual formation is:

the ***ongoing*** journey
of ***becoming***
like ***Christ***.

There’s a second half to that definition that I didn’t share last week. It’s the half that I’m going to unpack for the next several weeks. It’s the half that tells us what being “like Christ” looks like... because, as I said, there are a lot of different ideas of Jesus being sold out there these days.

And so it’s important we have a well-honed nose for sniffing out the truth from the lies about Jesus... for sniffing out the aroma of Christ from all of the knock off odors out there.

So here’s the full definition for you. Spiritual formation is the ongoing journey of becoming like Christ:

at one with God,
enlivened by the Spirit,
enacting shalom.

Those are the three key ingredients.

Those are the essential components of a Christ-consciousness.

That’s what it looks like to become like Christ:

At one with God,
enlivened by the Spirit,
enacting shalom.

Now, in a typical sermon series I'd take those in order, but today is Pentecost Sunday... and the Spirit has a way of messing up all our nice, neat lists...

So I don't have much of a choice but to start with the second characteristic first: enlivened by the Spirit.

And to get a picture of that... and I want to remind you that the Pentecost story we heard in Acts at the beginning of the service was written by Luke, the gospel writer. And when Luke tells this story of the disciples all being filled with the Spirit, with the wind and fire of God coming down on them, he's making a deep connection with how he tells the story of Jesus in his gospel.

And I really want you to hear this connection, so I'm going to read a few snippets from the beginning of Luke's gospel.

In chapter 1, an angel visits Mary and says she's going to have a baby. And in verse 35, the angel explains how this is going to happen, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Jesus is born, is created, with the Divine presence. The Divine is in his DNA.

Then in chapter 3, Luke tells us about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River with these words: **[read verses 21-22]**

Then in chapter 4 verses 1-2, just after the baptism, Luke writes,

"Jesus... [read verses 1-2]

It was the Spirit that led Jesus out to fast and pray.

Then he comes back from his time of fasting and praying and wrestling with his demons. **And in vs. 14** Luke tells us about the beginning of Jesus' ministry [vs. 14-15].

It was said that he taught as one, with a different kind of authority than the other religious leaders. He was filled with a kind of power and authority... a life-giving presence that came out of him.

And then Luke lays out for us Jesus' overall mission statement, a picture of what Jesus' life and ministry will be like when he tells the story of Jesus coming back to his hometown of Nazareth. We're still in chapter 4 here. Luke writes this "[verse 16-19]."

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

Luke is painting a striking picture of Jesus for us.

Jesus is born with the Divine presence of the Spirit.

Jesus awakens to the Spirit in his baptism.

Jesus is led by the Spirit to do his deep soul work of fasting and praying.

Jesus teaches in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus transforms the world through the presence and anointing of the Spirit.

And remember what we said last week: Jesus is a paradigm for us.

He shows us what it means to be fully human, to be the image of God.

Too often we've dismissed Jesus as something completely other than ourselves... as just God. We've forgotten that from the earliest centuries the church has said, every time we try to split part of Jesus off into his God-identity and part off into his human identity... we're slipping into "heresy."

This is what the church has taught. ***And "heresy" is really just a way of saying we're missing the invitation of the mystery.***

And so, the early church taught, "Jesus is at once the way we must follow and the goal we must reach." (Augustine)

Just as Jesus was enlivened by the Spirit...we are invited to become enlivened by the Spirit.

And to make that really clear, Luke parallels the way he begins his story about Jesus with the way he begins his story about us... the church.

The disciples are gathered together and when the day of Pentecost comes they are enlivened with the Spirit, just as Jesus was at his baptism. Pentecost is a parallel moment to Jesus' baptism.

And if you keep reading through Acts, you'll see those parallels continue. You'll see the disciples being led by the Spirit, and driven by the spirit, and enlivened by the Spirit, just as Jesus was.

Luke is making a connection for us. ***Jesus is the paradigm.***

We are invited to become people, ***enlivened by the Spirit of God.***

Last summer I was sitting at a kitchen table with a woman in her mid-80s. She had spent most of her life in the church. The first half of her life she spent as a Catholic. So her faith was defined mostly by faithfully fulfilling her Christian duties. She went to mass weekly. She did her Lenten fasts. She went to confession. She had her kids baptized and confirmed. She did all the things that she was taught a good Christian was supposed to do.

But at some point she left the Catholic Church. I don't really know why, but I do know that she ended up at a Protestant church. And there she did what Protestants do. She went to Bible studies and learned more of the Bible, things she never knew before. She got involved in different ministries. She loved it... but deep down it was really just another form of the same thing: more things to learn and do, do and learn.

It wasn't until years later, when she was in her 80s, that something finally dawned on her... a different way of seeing this faith of hers. "All this time I never realized it," she said to me. "All along... It's all about the fruits of the Spirit. That's the point!"

And of course, she's right.

When you are enlivened by the Spirit, certain things will begin to grow in you... there will be fruit... the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

You see, being enlivened by the Spirit doesn't mean we try harder to be more perfect. It doesn't necessarily even mean we have to ***do*** anything differently.

It means we **allow** a different kind of life to be lived through us... a life that wants to produce certain kinds of fruit in us.

That's why I use the word "enlivened." It's really not about demanding something, but opening us to something. "Being filled" with something is the way the scriptures describe it.

There is a breath, a wind, a fire of life that is flowing around us and in us.
The life of God is flowing to you, but so much of the time we live closed off to it.

We're unaware that when we were made in our mothers' wombs, we were made with the spark of the divine in us. The DNA of the divine is in you.

We're unaware that the Spirit is flowing around us, just as the water of the Jordan River flowed over and around Jesus. But when we awaken to it, we can begin to hear God's deep blessing that offers us a different kind of identity. "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." It's a different identity from which you can live.

We're closed off and unaware so much of the time. So that ongoing journey of becoming like Jesus is an ongoing process of becoming aware, of becoming open, of being filled.
It's the ongoing journey of letting go of our own agenda for our lives
and allowing God's Spirit to enliven us and carry us.

That's hard to do.

Truth is, it takes a lot of surrender... because you never know where the Spirit will take you. In fact, at one point Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

You never know where the Spirit will take you.
Sometimes that Spirit will carry us into the middle of controversy.
Sometimes that Spirit will carry us to the wilderness to wrestle with our demons.
Sometimes that Spirit will fill you with creativity and imagination.
Sometimes that Spirit will keep you planted right where you are and give you the strength to endure in a difficult situation.

You never know.

We can't control the Spirit of God. But that's kind of the point.
Being enlivened by the Spirit means not being in control anymore. While that may be unnerving, it's also so needed. Let's be honest. We're not too good at producing the fruit of the Spirit on our own, are we?

We're a lot better at being reactive and judgmental,
than being patient, kind, and faithful toward one another.
We're a lot better at guarding and defending,
than being generous and gentle.
We're a lot better at being anxious and frustrated,
than being joyful, loving, and peaceful.

"I never realized it's all about the fruit of the Spirit," she said.
We're invited to become enlivened by the Spirit.

There's a story from those early Christians we call the desert monastics. It's those Christians from the 4th and 5th centuries who followed Jesus' pattern of going into the desert and wrestling with their own demons, those wise Christians known as Abbas and Ammas, fathers and mothers.

In one story a man came to Abba Joseph and said, "Abba, as much as possible I practice my spiritual practices, keep my little fasts, do my prayers and meditations, remain quiet." You might add, "I do my Bible study. I give my tithe. I try to care for the poor. I... [fill in the blank with your preferred religious practice.]"

The man said, "as much as possible, I keep the commitments of my faith. What else should I do?"

Then the Abba Joseph, an old man at that time, slowly stood up. He stretched out his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten torches of flame. And he said, "Why not be turned completely into fire?"

Why not become completely enflamed?

This is the great invitation of our lives.
This is what Jesus reveals to us.
This is what salvation looks like.

We are invited to become enflamed with the life of God.
To awaken to the fire of the Spirit that has been planted in each of us,
And to cultivate that fire,
to nurture it in mind, heart, and body.

That's what the practices are all about.
That's what study, and worship, and community are all about.
...to nurture and cultivate the fire of God in us.

That woman in her 80s began to see it in a way she had never seen it before. She was being opened up to something quite profound for the first time. She had a new vision of what it means to be a Christian, to be "like Christ."

Now that woman is not part of our congregation, but we're in luck... because we have quite a few folks at the same stage of life as she and Abba Joseph, folks in their 70s, 80s, and 90s who are also enlivened by the Spirit.

And that doesn't just happen when you get older. It happens when your whole life has been shaped... over and over again... in an ongoing journey... by the life of Christ... and there are a lot of those folks among us.

You'll recognize them by the holy fire in their eyes.
By the genuineness in their hearts.
By the generosity in their actions.
By the humility in their presence.

We're a lucky church for having so many ... because the Spirit of God in them has a way of enlivening the Spirit of God in us. The fire in them has a way of stoking the fire in us.

On Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the birth of the church, that's an important thing to remember. ***A log cannot burn brightly on its own.***

The Spirit came on the followers of Jesus when they were all together.
The Spirit comes to us through one another so much of the time.

So on this Pentecost Sunday, may the Spirit of God in you,
be awakened by the Spirit of God in those around you.

And may you become more and more enlivened by the fire of the Divine.

May you be open to all the ways that the Spirit is flowing to you:
in nature and in beauty,
in neighbor and in friend.

May you stop controlling your life and those around you,
and allow the Spirit to drive you and lead you.

May it fill you with passion, and joy, and humility, and life eternal.
So that you too... might become... all aflame. Amen.