

What Does the Holy Spirit Look Like?

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Further Reading: *Introduction to the Missional Church* by Roxburgh and Boren

Introduction:

What does the Holy Spirit look like?

We read of His importance in Exodus 33: 15 “Then Moses said, If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?” John 20:21-22 says, “Again Jesus said (to the disciples) Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, then, is with us, but what does He look like?

It is important to be intentional about this question. As we said last week, the work of the Holy Spirit to facilitate a deeper engagement between people and a deeper engagement with God. He is not trying to focus attention upon himself. For this reason we often get confused about the Holy Spirit. The Christian church has been very intentional, then, to clarify what the Holy Spirit is and isn't.

Have you noticed how the language of the third person of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) has changed in English? In older hymns, documents and Bible translations the Holy Spirit is called the Holy Ghost. This was the preferred translation when, in everyday English, spirit was the word used for disembodied, personal powers. The church in that time took care to distinguish the “Holy Ghost” from the other spirits that people talked about. Over time in our language, perhaps because of the use of the “Holy Ghost” in the church, the common term shifted from “spirit” to “ghost”. (It is Caspar the friendly “ghost” not Caspar the friendly “spirit”) And so, to be clear, the church changed the English translation from Holy Ghost, to Holy Spirit. It is important to be intentional about the person of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we talked about the Holy Spirit in a personal but individualistic way. We looked at the Holy Spirit as an experience of being drawn out of ourselves. But what does the Holy Spirit look like in a community of people gathered together around Jesus Christ. This will be our focus today.

What does the Holy Spirit “look like” in a group of people?

The Scripture:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, Come over the Macedonia and help us. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 16:6-10

Move:

The Holy Spirit “looks like” being sent out into the lives of the community.

What is true in our individual experience of the Holy Spirit (see last week) is also true of our experience of the Holy Spirit as a community. The Holy Spirit calls us as a community to go out into the lives of those in our community.

This theme is in both the Exodus and John passages above. Moses recognizes the absolute need for the Holy Spirit as he continues to lead the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. The resurrected Jesus sends out the disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit for the journey.

This theme goes way back to the beginning of God's work with the Jewish people. In Genesis 12:1a we read, *“The Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. It all began with a call to “go out” into a new land, a new culture, a new language, new peoples...”* to a land, God said, I will show you.”

This theme continues in the New Testament. The first phrase of our passage reads, *“Paul and his companions traveled...”*

When we visualize the word “church” we often think of a building. We think of the activities that go on in the building on Sunday morning. We might even think of the work that goes into maintaining the building and the relationships among the people who gather there. But in the Bible the Holy Spirit is seen when a people is sent out from the places that they call “home”. The church goes forth into the lives of people they do not yet know. This is what it looks like to follow the Holy Spirit.

And so it is with us today. The Holy Spirit is drawing us together at Silverlake Church in order to send us out into the community around us. As we follow His lead we will embody a key aspect of what the Holy Spirit “looks like”.

The Holy Spirit “looks like” being sent out into the lives of others.

Move:

The Holy Spirit “looks like” experimentation.

When I was a young Christian I assumed that I would develop the kind of relationship with God in which I would have a clear sense of what God wanted me to do. I focused in on passage of the Bible where the main characters heard specific and clear direction from God. And I expected, at some point, that this would become a normal experience for me.

Now that I have been a Christian for a while, I am less inspired by those passages than I am by passages like ours today. I have had some times when I was very clear on what God was asking me to do before I did it. But they are few and far between. More commonly the guidance of the Holy Spirit comes through taking action and seeking to discern if this is the right direction or not. So, it is encouraging to read about the experience of Paul and his companions.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

This way of moving forward isn't really different from any other relationship we have. When we are relating to others there are moments of clarity. But the norm of our relationships is finding our way with one another through daily attempts to do the right thing. Sometimes we get it right, many times we get it wrong. But through the process of getting it right and wrong we get a clearer sense of what we need to do. So it is in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

And so it is at Silverlake. We will continue to move forward with the same clarity of Paul's group. We know that God is sending us out into the community. But we will figure out exactly what God is calling us to do in the community by making a series of experiments together. Some of these will work. Some of these will not. And if we get two wrong and one right then we have the same “batting average” as the Apostle Paul!

The Holy Spirit “looks like” experimentation.

Move:

The Holy Spirit “looks like” grassroots decision-making.

Notice what happens in the final verse of our passage. Paul and his friends have tried twice to move forward in obedience to God's call. Twice they have been

denied. So they go to Troas and rest. During the night Paul has a dream about a Macedonian begging them to come and help them. When Paul wakes up he tells the others about the dream. They talk about it together and then start packing to go to Macedonia. As Luke tells it, they “concluded” or decided that God had called them to go to Macedonia to tell people about Jesus.

Some take passages like this from the Bible to promote a particular method of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit looks like speaking in tongues, or prophecy, or “everything decently and in order”. In this case we might say that the Holy Spirit looks like dreams that make sense and are relevant to our situation. The Holy Spirit does use different methods at different times. But the key point of this passage is not to promote a method.

The point of this passage is to teach us that we have to make decisions together when following the Holy Spirit. We need to listen to one another, discern what God is saying to us, and make a decision about what our next step will be.

The Holy Spirit “looks like” grassroots decision-making.

Applications:

We are being gathered together to learn a different, and yet a very ancient way of being the church. We are to be church not just by following, but by embodying the work of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Spirit is calling us out into the lives of others. This means that we need to ask some new questions. If God is gathering us together to send us out into the community we need to ask, “What is God doing in the community?” Many a missionary has gone to share the gospel with a group of people, assuming they were the first wave of God’s work, only to find that God has been working among those people and is calling them to join into that work. The same is true in Silver Lake. God is already at work in our community. God is calling us to join in the work He has already begun. So, they question is, “What is God already doing in our community?”

We are going to need to go out into the community and build relationships with people in the community to find this answer. We don’t need to use “Christian jargon” to ask this question. Instead we need to think in the terms we spoke of last week. How are the people in this community being drawn out of themselves? How can we help them bridge that spiritual experience with the love and grace that God has demonstrated in Jesus Christ?

The Spirit is calling us into the lives of others.

2. We listen to each other in order to discern the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Once we get more clarity on the way God is at work in the community, we need to apply it to our lives together. We need to ask, "What are the ways we need to change in order to engage people in our community who no longer consider the church a part of their lives?" The church has often asked a different question. "How can we make the people of the community change to become like us?" But in following the Spirit we need to invert this question and determine how we can be a place where the people in this community can follow the lead of the Spirit right into the arms of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

We do this by listening to each other and discerning the lead of the Holy Spirit. On October 10 we are going to have a very special worship service together. We will meet in the fellowship hall for worship at 10:30am. We will gather around tables to sing. We will gather around Scripture as is our custom. But rather than a monologue from me (a sermon), we will listen for the Holy Spirit in our discussion together, as a community of Christ followers. We will read the passage together and listen to what God is saying to us. We will listen to what each other heard in the passage as we share around our table. Over lunch we will share what we have heard with our church community as a whole. In this way we will seek to discern the lead of the Holy Spirit at Silvelake church.

We listen to each other in order to discern the lead of the Spirit.

3. Embodying the Spirit looks like going out and experimenting in the community. Just like Paul and his companions, we will try this and try that. As we go forth we will work to discern together if this is the right step or if "the Spirit of Jesus" is not allowing us to move in this direction. When we need to stop and change direction we are embodying the experience of the Apostles. When we find clarity in that calling we are embodying the Spirit. We go out and experiment in the community.

We are being gathered together to learn a different, and yet a very ancient and Biblical, way of being the church. We are to be church not just by following, but by embodying the work of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, be excited! We are beginning a new adventure together.

One of the intriguing things about following the Spirit is the way he leads us, through discussion, discernment and experimentation, into deep relationships

with people whom we had not known before. This is one of the greatest parts of the adventure of being a Christian.

We see this reflected in our passage this morning. The first verse says that Paul and his companions were “kept by the Holy Spirit” from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Verse 7 tells us that “the Spirit of Jesus” would not allow them to enter the city of Bithynia. The Spirit of Jesus is the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit in a less general and more concrete guise. Jesus is the Holy Spirit in human form.

In verse 9 the description is even more concrete. A man from a particular region, with a particular way of being that says “Macedonia”, calls them to come and help. The Holy Spirit is in this dream as well, but dressed in a way that makes their call clear. They are to go and help the people in the area of Macedonia.

We will gain the same clarity as we follow the lead of the Spirit. We will move from the lead of the Spirit to specific people in our community that God is calling us to serve.

Given those that I have gotten to know in Silverlake so far, I am excited to see those whom God will call us to serve. Given each one of you, whom I am honored to know and to serve, I can't wait to see who we will go out and serve together. Given the amazing eclectic mix of our congregation, I cannot wait to see what kind of “out of the box”, artistic, amazing people we will come to know, to love and to serve as we follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, be excited! We are beginning a new adventure together; the adventure that God has called us to take as a community of faith!

Amen.