

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: Easter 6

Acts 16:9-15, Psalm 67, Revelation 21:10, 22--22:5, John 14:23-29

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“Following the Spirit’s Lead”

So what do people know about the Holy Spirit?

We know some basic things like the spirit is part of the Triune God:

that the Spirit moved over the waters of chaos in the beginning of creation,

that some of the prophets were anointed by the Spirit,

that Jesus promised that after he ascended God would send the Spirit to all Jesus’ disciples,

that God sent the Spirit onto those disciples and followers on the day of Pentecost,

that the early Church grew from the outpouring of the Spirit,

that there are 7 gifts of the Spirit enumerated in Isaiah –

wisdom and understanding, counsel and might and knowledge

and awe at God’s power and joy at God’s love;

that there are 9 fruits of the spirit –

love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness & goodness, kindness & gentleness & self-control;

that as Lutherans we believe that we cannot by our own understanding

believe in Jesus Christ, or come to Him;

but the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts,

and sanctified and kept us in the true faith,

and in the same way calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies

the whole Christian church on earth.

Anything else?

Well there a few more things noted about the Spirit in today’s readings.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will give peace and we’ll talk more about that on Pentecost.

He also says that the Spirit will remind us of everything that he taught,

that the Spirit would now teach.

We’re going to look today at how the Spirit teaches – as mentioned in the gospel –

and at how the Spirit leads – as mentioned in our first reading.

Last Sunday we took a look at another passage earlier in Acts

when God sent Peter a vision to prod him out of his comfort zone

so that he could fulfill the mission God had for him –

the mission to those who were not like him.

As a lifelong Lutheran I was taught about the Spirit.

I was taught what the Spirit is, and in a very academic way, told what the Spirit did.

It was kind of like being handed a job resume of the Spirit which I read and memorized

and then filed away.

I was never formally introduced to the Spirit.

Yes, the Spirit did send me gifts and experiences on occasion,

but it was like receiving those gifts from somebody who had applied for a job

whose application I had filed away but never met.

Then I met other Christians who worked with the Spirit on a daily basis.

I didn’t really know how that worked, but I have learned some things I’d like to share with you.

Jesus said the Spirit teaches us. But what does that mean?

Sometimes the Spirit teaches us through a teacher or a pastor or some other person.

Sometimes the Spirit teaches us through the Bible or other books.

Sometimes the Spirit teaches us through dreams.

But not everything we learn from a person or a book or a dream comes from the Spirit.

The part that is of the Spirit is the part that makes the light bulb go on, the aha moment,

the place where a connection is made that was never made before, the sudden insight that we receive.

So the Spirit can teach us through ordinary channels like people and books and dreams

but the way we know it's the Spirit is that these ordinary means provide us with extraordinary insight.

That's how the Spirit teaches us.

But in addition the Spirit also leads us, and this leading usually occurs in extraordinary ways.

But before we get into HOW the Spirit leads us, we must first look at WHY the Spirit leads us.

Any thoughts on why the Spirit leads us?

Simply put the Spirit leads us to get to where God wants us to go.

And in so doing, the Spirit works on a personal level for our individual lives

and on a collective level for our life together.

On an individual, personal level,

the Spirit leads us to the fulfillment of our destiny;

the Spirit leads us to Abundant Life;

the Spirit leads us into an ever deepening life of faith –

and by faith I'm not talking about some intellectual concepts to which we ascribe,

I'm talking about trust as God leads us in a step-by-step walk.

Each of us has a call on our life – an overarching lifelong call to live out the purpose for which God created us

and all the smaller day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, year-to-year calls

that work together to move us towards that lifetime goal.

But we as the church also have a collective call on our life together.

Every healthy organization has a mission and a purpose

and there are all kinds of ways to identify and support and fulfill such goals.

But just as not everything we learn from a teacher or a book is from the Spirit,

not every strategic planning process will help the church identify or support or fulfill its mission.

Such a process might be helpful, but it's neither essential nor sufficient,

because the ONLY thing that will lead a congregation

to fulfill its God-given mission and purpose is the leading of the Spirit.

And here's the thing about the Spirit. We can't control it.

We don't decide what we want to do or where we want to go

and then assume the spirit is OK with that.

Because as long as we rely on human processes we are not relying on the Spirit.

Relying on the Spirit means that we have to give up control.

Let's go back to last week's lesson.

Peter wanted to fulfill God's purpose for him

but he had already set up boundaries and parameters and lines that he would not cross.

He didn't want to leave his comfort zone.

He wanted to stay with people who were just like him.

And God sent a vision to tell him that the mission was beyond his comfort zone.

His mission was to people he was not comfortable with.

But when he goes where the Spirit leads amazing things happen.

And so Peter begins to learn how to do this "giving up control and walking by faith" thing,

which is what he's doing in today's reading.

So the reason the Spirit leads us is so that we can fulfill the purpose that God has for us both as individuals and as a congregation.

But the way that the Spirit leads us is not as clear cut as the way the Spirit teaches us. As I said earlier the Spirit can teach us through ordinary people and books and dreams to help us come to extraordinary insights.

Of course we can't predict when those extraordinary insights will occur, they simply happen when we are going about our ordinary task of living. That's how the Spirit teaches.

The way the Spirit leads us can be in much the same manner – as we go about our ordinary lives – or the Spirit can lead us in more extraordinary ways.

But whether it's through ordinary or extraordinary means, this way of following the Spirit is not something that most of us have been taught or have practiced.

In our sophisticated culture we simply decide what we want to do and go about making it happen. We create a committee and set goals and objectives and come up with a plan. That's our human way of doing things, but it is NOT the way the Spirit works.

So how does the Spirit lead us? Sometimes it's in ways of which we are barely aware. On Thursday, for example, 2 somewhat strange things happened when I went to visit a man in the hospital.

The first thing that was strange was that when I got to the room his wife and nephew were in paper gowns & gloves with face shields in addition to their masks. They had been asked to do that but were not told why.

I was not asked to put on those protective garments. We all thought that a bit strange. But as we were discussing the matter I realized I had put on my \$50 super duper mask that not only acts as a physical barrier but is treated with a substance that kills viruses.

I hadn't worn that mask since I took a plane to Barbados last fall, and had no idea why I had grabbed it that day.

Well just several hours after my visit, the man's wife discovered she had tested positive for Covid. At first I was a bit worried, but then I realized I had only been there for 15 minutes,

I'd had on my super-duper mask and she was completely encased in protective gear. I hadn't known why I had grabbed that particular mask and she didn't know why she had been asked to cover herself so completely, but all of the sudden it made perfect sense to me:

the Spirit had been protecting me from getting Covid!

Sometimes we will find ourselves doing things we don't normally do and it's only in retrospect that we realize the Spirit was leading us.

Sometimes we will feel the urge to do something – to call someone, to send a card or a text or an email – and when we follow such promptings it becomes clear why we were so prompted.

As a congregation, it's a bit more difficult to discern the Spirit's leading, but here are some methods we can follow:

1. Mission begins with prayer – not just a short perfunctory, pro-forma prayer but intense focused prayer: prayers from individuals and prayers from people gathered together; prayers that aren't read out of a book but that spring from the heart; prayers that go on for days and weeks and even months as people intentionally wait and actively listen for God to answer.
2. Mission is grounded in Scripture which means it cannot be discovered without Bible Study: personal Bible study and group Bible Study; Bible study not simply for the sake of study, but with the intention of discerning mission; Bible study that specifically looks at what Scripture has to say about mission – as found in the words of the prophets, in Jesus' life, in the great commission, in Paul's life, and in the Acts of the Apostles;
3. Mission is discovered in relationships with those who are different from us: people with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives; people who have things to teach us and people who can learn from us. And...
4. Mission results in growth and new life. The first signs will be in individual people who will be growing in their prayer life, in their studying of God's Word, in their worship, in their service, and in their talking about their faith. And once enough people are growing in their faith and in the sharing of their faith, then the church itself will grow. Those who are in need of something that will provide meaning and purpose aren't looking for another human organization; people already have plenty of those. If that's all they find in a congregation they'll visit once and never come back. But if they find a community where the Spirit is present and active and obvious in the people around them, if they meet people who exhibit the fruits of the Spirit, if they see people who are filled with a vibrant faith, then they will want to know the secret to this different kind of life, this richer kind of life, this more abundant kind of life.

So to recap....

The Spirit is not just a concept that we learn about; the Spirit is the living presence of God that can lead us in our moment-by-moment, day-by-day, week-by-week walk with God.

The Spirit teaches us through ordinary means by providing those light-bulb experiences, those aha moments, those amazing connections.

And the Spirit leads us in our individual lives and in our life together, sometimes when we are unaware, or barely notice, but also when we seek the Spirit's guidance in pursuing God's call on our personal lives and in our life together.

We seek that guidance through intensive prayer and Bible Study and worship and service.

And we know we have received that guidance when we see the change in people's lives – change that shows as people exhibit an increase in the fruits of the Spirit, as their faith deepens and as they are led to share that blessing with others.

And as their individual lives change, so will their life together.

The Spirit is more than a concept – the Spirit is the living presence of God.

The Spirit is less like a noun than a verb,

because the Spirit is always moving, always teaching, always leading us forward to where we are called to be.

The Spirit is so much more than anything we can describe, because the Spirit is the very breath of creation.

Pray more.

Study God's Word more.

Worship with more than your mind but with your whole being.

And then get ready.

Because life in the Spirit is no walk in the park but more like an amusement park ride.

Buckle up because despite the risks, despite the struggles, despite the challenges,

there's no greater meaning, no greater adventure, and no greater joy than life in the Spirit. **Amen**