

Knowing What Not to Say

Psalm 46:10,11

Acts 8:14-24

The episode we just read in Acts follows immediately after the first great persecution. Saul (not yet become Paul), has rampaged through Jerusalem, hauling Christians before kangaroo ecclesiastical courts. The lucky ones get flogged. The unlucky, like Stephen, the first martyr, get stoned to death. Many Christians have fled the city. Yet the Gospel continues to spread faster than a California wildfire. It has even found converts in Samaria, where the Jews' despised cousins with their funky religion live. In summary, Acts 8 tells of spiritual blessings in a time of pervasive fear and anger. Does this sound at all familiar?

I use social media to keep in touch with people in many places. Linda and I have lived literally from coast to coast and our families have dispersed. Facebook and Instagram can be excellent bonding tools for us. They can also be sewers of hatred and sowers of discord. They stoke the fires of rage. 2020 has become the perfect storm. Racial protests and socialist riots. The virus. The election. And now we learn that Asteroid 2018VP1 may hit the earth on November 2—the day before the election concludes. (To be honest, the asteroid is only about as tall as I and would burn up in the outer atmosphere before doing any damage, but why inject fact into a year that swallows reasonableness like a black hole slurping stars?)

Back to the text. In a climate of deep anxiety, the disciples in Jerusalem get some good news. Non-Jews have begun accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior! Peter and John go to investigate. These two find the “(Holy Spirit) had not yet fallen on any of them...” For the Samaritan Christians, “had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” The author of Acts believes that when the Holy Spirit falls on a person it makes a mark. He believes you can tell when a believer has it, and these Samaritans do not. We Presbyterians tend to accept this belief as a theological proposition, as an academic point. But we tend not to dwell too heavily on its implications in the real world. What mark does the Holy Spirit make? What does it visibly change about a person? What can Christians who have received the Holy Spirit do that others cannot? How do we receive the Holy Spirit?

We will address these questions, but first we must deal with the man Simon who appears in Acts 8. The New Testament contains perhaps as many as five different Simons, one of them listed as a member of the twelve disciples. This is not that Simon, but a hustler who runs magic cons. Seeing that visible difference made by the arrival of the Holy Spirit, he offers to buy a share of it. He wants to add it to his bag of tricks, to profit from it. Peter sees through his scheme and threatens him with death. (“Your silver perish with you!”) From this exchange we learn at least two things: the Holy Spirit does have visible power; and we cannot control it. We cannot buy or sell it. If Peter and John did have the ability to lay hands on people and call for the Spirit to fall upon them, the two men did not have the authority to command it. They could only ask. Perhaps we ought to take a lesson from this.

What mark does the Holy Spirit make? What does it visibly change about a person? What can Christians who have received the Holy Spirit do that others cannot? How do we receive the Holy Spirit? Let us address the elephant in the room. We belong to a branch of the Christian tree that does not emphasize the visible power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, talking about spiritual gifts or the “spiritual life” can make some Presbyterians uneasy. I relearned this early this year in a meeting of a board for a Presbyterian entity on which I serve. The organization's staff had given us a copy of a new mission statement. I had read it in advance and had time to ask myself why it did not satisfy me. I realized it contained no mention of spiritual formation or spiritual gifts. As I regarded these as central to the mission of that organization I raised my concern. And I was met with silence. Awkward, uncomfortable silence. I knew why.

Over forty years of serving the Presbyterian church I have encountered that silence repeatedly. And I have learned that people have different reasons for reacting in that way. Some struggle to believe in any physical manifestation of God. These folks tend not to believe the Bible's claims for supernatural events. They do not accept that the seas parted so the children of Israel could escape Egypt. They do not accept the miracles of Jesus. They do believe in God, but in a God who does not get too involved with this vale of tears. Others accept the supernatural claims of the Bible more completely, but do not like to speak of it. As a person who fits in this category once told me, “That kind of talk seems a little Baptist-y.” In a polite church like ours, we have an unwritten list of things not to talk about. The Holy Spirit tops that list.

Whatever the motive, I want to address our Presbyterian preference to keep the Holy Spirit at arm's length. I was born, baptized, confirmed, ordained an elder and ordained a minister of the Word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church. And I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. You can do so without holding to a literal interpretation of scripture. For example, I believe **something** happened when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. But I do not believe in the accuracy of the picture of the event found in the children's Bible my grandparents gave me. There, you would see remarkably Caucasian-looking Hebrews with shining faces striding on totally dry ground between two towering walls of seawater. What really happened? I do not know. But I can tell you that the greater miracle may well have been God finally getting Pharaoh to agree to letting go of thousands of perfectly good slaves.

What really happens in Acts 8? Simon sees something that makes him want whatever those people received. We, too, should want whatever the Holy Spirit is and does. And we do not have to guess about what this means. The New Testament tells us, again and again, about the gifts of the Spirit. In Galatians a converted Paul lists them as, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." There is nothing spooky, nothing that should cause awkward silences about such a list. Indeed, in these times of pervasive fear and anger, we can use all of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit we can possibly get.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit **are** the visible marks the Spirit makes on us. We need to understand that when we see them, whether in ourselves or in others, **we see**

the Holy Spirit. For some years I led a Tuesday afternoon worship service in a retirement community. Two years after leaving them behind in Traverse City I still miss the folks who attended. I think of Merle and Dorothy, a couple married for sixty-six years before they died within a few weeks of each other (not, I think, coincidentally). Dorothy lost her sight some years before. So she would put her hand on Merle's shoulder and he would lead her to the dining hall, or the laundry, or wherever. She would constantly tell him what to do, including how to eat, in great detail. I often pondered his life, physically connected to a wife who never stopped giving him orders. But I came to realize I was missing the deeper point: ***Merle loved her so much he was endlessly patient with her.*** Love and patience: two gifts of the Holy Spirit. Two visible proofs of the power of God.

I think of Don, whom I had the privilege of baptizing in his 92nd year. Marv, another resident in that retirement community, invited him to worship with us. After he attended a few services Don asked to visit with me privately. He told me of his Navy career, including things he had done in the Pacific theater of World War II that he said, "still make me ashamed of myself." He went on to become a research scientist. Like many educated, scientific people he had intellectual questions about Christianity. But worshiping with us, and his advancing age, made him determined to try to answer those questions. We talked several times but he did not make a lot of spiritual progress. Then Grace, another resident said, "Have you prayed about it?"

Don tried praying about it. And over the course of time he found himself

believing in God. It actually surprised him. But he did believe. Faith: a gift of the Holy Spirit. Nothing flashy, nothing odd or off, just a new reality in the life of a decent, normal guy. **And that's the point.** We need to stop falling silent when the subject turns to the Holy Spirit. It is at work all around us. Believing this does not require that we check our brains at the door. It requires rather that we open our eyes.

This is the first in our series of stewardship sermons in this year of fear and anger. To this point it cannot have seemed like much of a stewardship sermon. When will the preacher get around to asking for our money? Not until the preacher finishes talking about filling up the cistern. We cannot draw from a dry well. We cannot give—in any way, including with money—unless we feel inspired to do so. Oh, we can give without spirit. In all honesty I have an email that has sat in my inbox for over a week. It more or less demands that I give money to a certain organization. I do not feel particularly inspired to do so but I know that I will eventually get around to it. But is that really giving? Or is it a guilt offering? I think we all know the answer.

In order truly to give we must first fill up the cistern. We must retain the waters of the Holy Spirit that we might give to the ministry of that Spirit. We must accept the gifts of the Spirit in order to give freely, joyously back to it. When we do receive the Spirit we can give in every way: with our gifts of love, patience and all the rest, and with our money. And our giving becomes an act of thanksgiving. **This** is the spiritual gift I wish for every one one of us: that we might accept the Spirit, and give from its depths. Now **those** towering walls of water are something in which I do believe.