

Key Worker

Numbers 11:24-30 | Psalm 104:26-37 | Acts 2:1-15 | John 7:37-39

ACTS 2:1-15

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³ But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

INTRODUCTION

In the 18th century, Yoruba drummers in West Africa played an hour-glass shaped instrument called a *talking drum*, that, using tension cords connecting two drumheads, could mimic elements and tones of human speech. This was important because it could be used to convey messages—news, warnings, birth announcements—over distances of even four or five miles. This drum became an inspiration for a series of experiments over the next century in the field of telegraphy, including the development of the electric telegraph. By 1837, William Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone had created the first commercial telegraph system. And by the end of the 19th century, telegraph systems were in use across the world, connecting government offices, connecting rail stations, and eventually becoming an essential part of military communications during the First and Second World Wars.¹ The telegraph, like the drum, was simple to use. A single wire connected terminals in remote locations and operator at each end would tap on a switch, called a telegraph key, to hammer out their messages in Morse code—an incredibly complicated series of long and short pulses that correspond to letters in order to spell out words. Given the important and essential nature of these messages, it is thought that telegraph operators tapping away on their telegraph keys are the origin of the phrase *key worker*, a phrase that took on a magnified significance during our recent pandemic.² Key workers, or essential workers, are those whose work is necessary for society to keep functioning—like communications workers, and so makes it worth them risking going to work even under the most adverse of conditions. Of course, it raises the question: What kind of work is key work?

¹ Thomas Gray, "The Inventors of the Telegraph and Telephone," in the *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 71 (1892), p.639–659.

² Steven Poole, "'Key Worker': How a 19th-Century Term Evolved into Political Rhetoric" in *The Guardian*, April 9, 2020.

As we turn to our Acts reading—our topic today is that of the Holy Spirit—the third member of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This morning, we find ourselves considering the great story of Pentecost and the highly anticipated arrival of the Holy Spirit. And I want to take a step back and ask this question: What is the work of the Holy Spirit? Who is he? What does he do? I believe this passage helps us to an answer: He is a key communications worker. Indeed, as we consider the Acts story, I will suggest to you that the essential function of the Holy Spirit, in his arrival, is the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ through the spread of the Word of God. That is, if we want to understand who the Holy Spirit is—who the third person of the Triune God truly is—we have to understand that his essential work is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ through spreading the Word of God. To see this, we will briefly consider, first, the story and three miraculous signs. Then we will consider, more broadly, how the Holy Spirit is framed throughout the Scriptures.

1. THREE SIGNS

First, the story. Gathered and praying in the upper room, the Apostles waited for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And he does, indeed, arrive, accompanied by three miraculous signs. The first sign is a loud sound like rushing wind. The second sign the appearance of divided tongues of fire above the heads of the Apostles. And the third sign is that of the spontaneous utterances—speaking in tongues. At least 16 different groups heard that sound—the Apostles speaking about God’s deeds of power. And each heard in his own native language—in a kind of reversal of the Tower of Babel.³ But notice this, the three miraculous signs all work together in an important way. The first is a sound. The second is tongues. The third is the sound of numerous tongues. It’s all a way of indicating the particular, the essential function of the Holy Spirit as he arrives. His task, more than any other, is a communicative one. It is an aural one. It relates to hearing. Like a talking drum or a telegraph, his task is about communication. His task is to speak of God to God’s people. It is a proclamatory task.

2. TWO CONTEXTS

But let’s dig a little deeper. And for this, I want us to consider two ways the Holy Spirit is framed more widely in Scripture. First, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is not present permanently, but is deployed for miraculous deeds (like at Pentecost), generally communicating God’s will to God’s people. So, for example, He was there at Creation, hovering over the waters, when God spoke the world into existence.⁴ The first two signs from our Acts reading—a loud sound and tongues of fire—evoke both the imagery of Exodus—when God’s Spirit—the Holy Spirit—led his people through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.⁵ King David said the Spirit spoke through him.⁶ When the prophets were filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke God’s words.⁷ Later in the Old Testament, the Lord said that he, by putting his Spirit upon his people, would put his words

³ Gen 11:1-9.

⁴ Gen 1:1-2.

⁵ Exod 13:17–14:29. The imagery also recalls a prophetic moment of John the Baptist in Luke 3: “...one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16) The Baptist uses the imagery of the grain harvest (appropriate for Pentecost) as well as the imagery of fire, noting that fire both purifies or refines as well as burns or destroys.

⁶ 2 Sam 23:2.

⁷ See 2 Chr 15:1, 20:14, 24:20 and Joel 2:28-29.

in his people's mouths.⁸ Ezra remarked, in his great prayer to the Lord, that the Spirit was given to instruct his people.⁹ Elihu, in the book of Job, notes that the Spirit gives God's people understanding.¹⁰ The Psalmist asks for God to give his Spirit to lead his people in teaching.¹¹ While the Holy Spirit does other things, his primary function throughout the Old Testament is to lead God's people through communication, through teaching, through God's Word.

But let's also consider the context of the story here in Acts. The Spirit, when he was promised in Acts 1:8—as we heard on both Ascension Day and last Sunday—was paired with the notion of the Apostles bearing witness. And this plays out in the rest of the book. In Acts 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, and so on, the Holy Spirit indwells the Apostles, compelling them to speak.¹² Specifically, in places like 4:25, the Spirit is said to have been speaking through the writing of the Old Testament so that, in 4:31, the Spirit might fill the Apostles to speak the Word of God. The Spirit's leading through the book of Acts meant the gospel travelled from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.¹³ Indeed, if we keep reading the New Testament, we will see that the Scriptures are God-Spirited and he has been speaking through the Scriptures from the beginning.¹⁴ But even here in our story, the Spirit fundamentally compels the Apostle to speak a message—in a variety of tongues—a message of the powerful deeds of God. And as Peter begins his sermon, he does just that. He speaks of the mightiest work of God, the work of raising Jesus Christ from the dead so that his people might be saved. And so, both throughout the Bible and in this story of the Acts of the Apostles, the primary role of the Holy Spirit is to enable communication.

3. ONE TASK

The three signs, then, along with these two instance of wider context, make it clear. The essential work of the Holy Spirit—not the only work, but the one key task—is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ through spreading the Word of God.

So, why does this matter to us? It matters for a couple reasons. First, it matters because it helps us know where to find the Truth. We live in a world that tells us to seek Truth in any number of places, from the spirit of the plants around us to the drugs to cold rational philosophy to the inside our own hearts and minds—but, ironically, fears Truth that comes from the Bible. Now I want to be very clear here. I am not saying the Holy Spirit does not speak to us through circumstances, through the voices of people who provide godly counsel, through intuition, or even through visions and dreams. The Spirit's work is often accompanied by miraculous events—as we saw in our reading. This reminds me of a story of a Christian missionary deep in the jungle of Tanzania. Confronted by human-devouring lions, the missionary, inspired by the story of Daniel, prayed: 'Lord, give your Spirit to these lions, that they may become Christians and so spare us.' As the lions pounced, the missionary heard a voice, the lion was speaking: 'Thank you, Father, for this delicious meal we are about to eat. Amen.' Perhaps not through that kind of miraculous event, or any, but the Spirit does his work. And we do well to

⁸ Isa 59:21.

⁹ Neh 9:20.

¹⁰ Job 32:8.

¹¹ Ps 143:10.

¹² Acts 4:8, 25, 31; 5:32; 6:10; 7:55; 8:29; 10:44; 11:15; 15:8.

¹³ Acts 1:8.

¹⁴ See 2 Tim 3:16-17 and Heb 3:7.

realize that his primary task is speaking to us, not through miracles, but with, in, and through the Word of God. For those of you who do not believe, or even those who think you do believe, this means it might be time to take seriously what God has said in the Scriptures. In them, we find the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ died and rose again to save us from both our sins and facing the judgement we deserve for our sins—our rebellion against God in evil, selfish, self-serving thoughts, words, and deeds. At the same time, we also do well to be sceptical about any voices that would challenge fidelity to that Word. If I speak to you and advise you against the Scriptures, you should be confident that the Holy Spirit is *not* speaking. If you hear the message of a church, or a teacher, or even a dream, and it is contrary to the Scriptures, you may be confident it is *not* the Holy Spirit. In short, the message of salvation to a world deeply in need of such a message is found in the Scriptures, carried forth for thousands of years and to the ends of the earth by the Spirit of God.

Secondly, it matters because it helps us know what to do. Don't underestimate the leading of the Holy Spirit. His arrival on Pentecost brought together the dispersion, even across many languages. His work through Peter's sermon that day meant the conversion of 3,000 people.¹⁵ The Holy Spirit is still at work, spreading the gospel through the Word across time and place, without limit. We who are Christians should feel empowered by the Spirit to spread the good news to our very confused world, for its sake and our own. And we should do so with some vigour. We do not have time to consider the whole sermon that Peter preached that day, but the reading did include his opening line. *"Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning."*¹⁶ I love this line because Peter opened with a joke. 'These guys are excited to speak to you about the mighty deeds of God, the resurrection of Jesus that makes salvation available to you. And they are doing so with such excitement, such fervour, that they might be confused for being drunk. But they are not drunk. It's only 9am.' The implication of that last phrase: 'Come back later, then, they might be drunk.' But imagine, for a moment, being so excited to share the gospel with the world around you that people think you're tipsy. Do we have that kind of enthusiasm, that kind of eagerness, that kind of elation? I suspect, as Anglicans, we're a little less inspired. Either way, if we really have the Spirit of God dwelling in us, perhaps others should notice?

CONCLUSION

And so, let me finish with restating my point: The Spirit came that day, the day of Pentecost, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ might be proclaimed to the ends of the earth through the preaching and teaching of God's Word by God's people. Let us not stray too far from this essential task, this key work, for the Spirit is still at work. As we think back on the Ascension, with our eyes fixed on the clouds, let us consider joining in the work of the Spirit. As the poet Christopher George Latore Wallace wrote: *"Stay far from timid, ...make moves when your heart's in it. And live the phrase 'Sky's the limit.'"*¹⁷

Let's pray: *Heavenly Father, help us. Fill us with your Spirit, that your gospel would be made known in and by our lives. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁵ Acts 2:41.

¹⁶ Acts 2:14-15.

¹⁷ The Notorious B.I.G., "Sky's the Limit," from *Life After Death* (1997).