

PREPARING FOR PENTECOST

First Presbyterian Church, Benton, AR

By Emily Laurel

Let us pray: Lord God, we thank you for bringing us together at this particular time in our church's life. May today's message be a blessing as we journey together through God's word and the inspirations of Holy Spirit. May there be one voice we hear today—the voice of truth and grace.

Hear now the words of the Lord.

Acts 10:44-48 NRSV

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It's Still Easter Time.

It almost seems that Easter is over. We had Holy Week and then Easter weekend, with the sunrise service, the flowering of the cross, and the beautiful Easter worship service. But, this is still Easter. Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter, next Sunday is Ascension Sunday, and the following Sunday is Pentecost, which we traditionally celebrate by wearing red and having a party. This year will be a church ice cream social after Sunday morning worship. I've heard that people here in our congregation are already busily preparing for the Pentecost party.

It seems that preparations are being made all around us.

You might already be a part of the preparations for the upcoming presbytery meeting on June 6-7, an important occasion in the life of First Presbyterian-Benton. Every nook and cranny is being cleaned, and our property, from one end to the other, is under scrutiny by our heavenly dusters as they search for dirt, cobwebs, and anything that is out of place.

Then, right on the heels of the June presbytery meeting will be Vacation Bible School, which also requires preparation, paying close attention to every detail from food preparation to teacher preparation to preparation of the spaces in our church that we plan to use.

And, you might also have heard or read about the emergency preparedness activities being planned for our church. In coming weeks and months as a church we will be preparing ourselves in case of an emergency or disaster situation. We will be reaching out to you for your

support and ideas and expertise as we prepare a master plan for helping and supporting our brothers and sisters in Christ if need be.

Last but not least, as far as I know, this is nomination time in the church's annual cycle. Today after worship we will have a congregational meeting to elect our 2015 church nominating committee members in preparation for the annual election and installation of new leaders for our congregation. Then, those new elders and deacons must be prepared to assume their leadership responsibilities.

So, you and I have lots of preparing to do.

A couple of days ago as I discussed today's message with my sister, I stated that my intent was to speak on Holy Spirit. She gently pointed out that I had already spoken on that topic, to which I replied, every time I have the opportunity to talk from this pulpit, I talk about the need to prepare ourselves for a deeper recognition and growing awareness of the presence and movement of Holy Spirit in our lives.

And today is no exception, especially when I looked at the revised lectionary texts for today and saw the first reading, which is Acts 10:44-48

Let's turn our attention to the text for today. It begins, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." Obviously, something has happened before this part of the story. It's like we are walking in on the end of a movie, and only those who have seen it before know what is going on. I wish I had time to read all of Chapter 10 of the book of Acts not only because it is an interesting read but also because it is full of spiritual mystery. It describes visions experienced by Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and the Apostle Peter. Eventually, after their visions, Cornelius and his Gentile group meet with Peter and his Jewish group. Peter begins his sermon.

This is where we enter the story.

Because of Peter's encounters with Holy Spirit he knows that he must open his heart and share his testimony with Cornelius and his Gentile companions despite his discomfort in being with Gentiles. Right in the middle of Peter's sermon, Cornelius and his people begin speaking in tongues like the disciples did at Pentecost. Peter and his Jewish friends are shocked and in awe that Gentiles are being filled with the Holy Spirit. Needless to say, there is confusion and pandemonium, which ultimately results in baptism for the Gentiles and a new friendship between Jew and Gentile.

Yes, the Holy Spirit can be disruptive. Sometimes the Spirit's action or presence or message may be quite dramatic, even disrupting good Presbyterian order.

What is the relevance?

What does this scripture mean for you and me? How does a story about Peter and Cornelius connect with us today? How is it relevant for us here and now?

Preparation is the key

I believe that we have an imperative to prepare ourselves today and every day to accept the divine movements and activities and influence of Holy Spirit in our lives.

But I have to ask, how can we be accepting unless we first recognize what is happening and not just chalk it up to one coincidence after another. We'll explore some ideas about how Holy Spirit may manifest for us, along with some roadmaps to follow to help us discern the truth of the matter.

The movement of Holy Spirit described in today's reading was quite dramatic. But that is not always the case. Far more likely is a more subtle experience of the movement of Spirit in our lives individually and perhaps in the life of our congregation. I consider that to be the "still, small voice of holy guidance."

Being Mindful

One thing we can do is to establish our intent to remain constantly mindful of the still, small voice that resides within each of us. Of course, we may experience Holy Spirit like Cornelius and his people did in the middle of Peter's sermon or through some form of spiritual ecstasy, but more often than not the movement of Holy Spirit is far more subtle.

Discerning the Truth

Confirming the spiritual experience should be sought from others we trust. All of us need to have other people in our lives to whom we can turn or guidance and discernment about our own experiences. Because we can so easily misread and misinterpret our experiences, self-discernment isn't to be trusted. Reluctance to share our experiences with others is not uncommon because of a fear of the unknown or perhaps of being ridiculed or embarrassed. I recognize the importance of being fully there and foregoing the temptation to judge the person or their experience.

It's easy for me to stand up here and tell you ways I have learned that tend to create a spiritual environment conducive to personal religious experience. A rule of thumb is: the more you deepen your spiritual connection through spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation, walking a labyrinth, serving a person in need, or a myriad of other practices, the more in touch with Holy Spirit you will be.

Over time two different approaches to the Christian life have evolved with one approach stressing theological correctness and the other approach one that appeals to the emotions. I would describe this as a clash between intellectualism and emotionalism. I expect many in our world today tend more toward the intellectual than the emotional approach to the Christian life.

For purposes of discussion, let's say that there is more to the world than our five senses can identify, so we are at least open to spiritual experience as a possibility. The truth is that in spite

of hesitation and fear, people in our time continue to have experiences that defy explanation. Several types of these experiences have been described in **Reformed Spirituality**, by Howard L. Rice. Understanding the wide range of possibilities for spiritual experience may help us to recognize and accept their appearance in our lives or in the lives of others.

Kinds of Experiences

Among the possibilities for spiritual experience we find **conversion** experiences. Conversion experiences may mean that we go from a state of unbelief to belief or it may be the experience of moving from secondhand to firsthand faith, from the faith of our ancestors to deep personal conviction. Conversion can be seen as a beginning of a spiritual growth spurt.

Ecstatic experiences such as described in today's reading from Acts can happen to any one person or even to many people simultaneously. For many of us Reformed Christians, the drama of an ecstatic experience may be too much to reveal, so we keep the experience to ourselves and suppress our emotional response. An encounter with Holy Spirit may cause an ecstatic state, perhaps resulting in breakthrough into greater spiritual depth.

With **Visionary and auditory** experiences people can easily mistake their own deeply held desires for visitations from God. As I mentioned earlier, being able to discuss these experiences with people worthy of trust is very important for emotional and spiritual well-being.

Intuitive experiences are very common moments in which we simply have an inner sense of what is needed in a particular situation, or in which a particular insight lets us know what is really going on in the midst of what may otherwise appear to be only confusion. For example, we may be in a time of deep personal indecision, wondering what to do in a particular situation. Then, in a flash all becomes clear, and the answer obvious. The answer may seem to have been provided by another, an inner peace is present, and there are no second thoughts. We just KNOW the answer, and we give thanks for receiving the guidance we are so desperate to receive.

An experience similar to intuition is one of **congruence** or what we call **coincidence**. The best example I can think of is Pastor Dari's unexpectedly gaining eligibility to be called as our installed pastor after years of "knowing" that was forbidden. In these cases one event in life fits completely with another in such a way that we recognize as divine intervention, knowing we did nothing to make these events come together. These experiences defy explanation. As with other experiences of spiritual mystery, there is some danger of mistaking self-will for God's presence. Know that with such messages from God will never lead a person to acts that go against reason and morality.

With all of these experiences, ranging from conversion to coincidence, we find there are common characteristics that are healthy and in harmony with the broad sweep of Christian tradition. Consider these points as you ponder whether you might benefit from a conscious effort to deepen your spiritual connection with the Divine.

Guidelines

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First, the experience of the holy is **unexpected**. It is ordinarily something that people do not seek, often happening as we are going about other business. For example, Cornelius and his people were carefully listening to Peter as he preached and witnessed to them; they were as surprised as Peter was when Holy Spirit chose that very moment to create a wave of healing for the people and circumstances of that time.

Second, the experience of the holy **has an element of awe**. In the scriptures, people encountered by God are terrified at what has happened. For instance, Saul was blinded by awe. Experiences described only in terms of being lovely and wonderful should be carefully evaluated. God's powerful love is never a comfortable private possession and will always include both a sense of inner peace and an uncomfortable experience of awe.

Third, the experience **demands something** of a person and often that demand requires the person to accomplish something difficult. For instance, Saul is required to become the apostle of the very faith that he has sworn to oppose and destroy. People are required to take up tasks, to make changes, or to let go of something precious. If there is no demand and only a confirmation of the person's present life, the experience certainly differs from biblical experiences and needs careful evaluation.

There are other sorts of spiritual experiences we may encounter. Such encounters are quite common and most of us are blessed by experiences in which the love of God is made real for us. Our problem is that we are not paying attention, and therefore miss the blessing of discovering the intimate presence of God in our everyday lives. To be aware, awake, and attentive is to discover the love that will not let us go, the love that is the ground of all our strength and hope.

Conclusion

As I bring this message to a close, I offer you a scripture reading from our last Tuesday morning Bible Study class. It was an almost immediate answer to my prayer for guidance on what direction today's message should take. Listen now to the word as written in 1 Timothy, Chapter 4.

Train yourself for a holy life! While physical training has some value, training in holy living is useful for everything. It has promise for this life now and the life to come. This saying is reliable and deserves complete acceptance.

What is more important than the preparations for the Pentecost party or the impending onslaught of hundreds of people for Presbytery's June meeting or for the gathering of people from our congregation and from the neighborhood for Vacation Bible School or for our emergency preparedness efforts?

The answer to that question is easy. The most important thing for each and every one of us is to be preparing ourselves for embracing the presence of God in our hearts and souls.

Do join in the preparations for the upcoming events in the life of our church, but join together here and now as together we form the intent to consciously invite Holy Spirit to fill our beings and grace our lives.

Let us pray:

Christ Jesus, before ascending into heaven, You promised to send the Holy Spirit to Your apostles and disciples. Grant that the same Spirit may perfect in our lives the work of Your grace and love. Grant that we be filled with a loving reverence toward You, that we may find peace and fulfillment in the service of God while serving others; and that we may have the courage to overcome obstacles that interfere with our salvation. Grant that we may grow in holiness; with minds filled with the light of Your truth.

Amen.