“***Baptizes with the Holy Spirit”*** by S. Finlan. The First Church, Jan. 17, 2021

**John 1:32–34**

32And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

**John 14:15–18, 26; 15:26**

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. . .

26 “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. . . 15:26 When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.”

Life can have its own momentum, sometimes, with its own daily patterns and demands, but behind the scenes something is building up to produce something new. And it seems that suddenly the moment arrives and someone is filled with the essence of the Spirit. And this was happening when Jesus approached John the Baptist to be baptized.

John’s awareness of Jesus’ special status seems to have grown with time, and then to have received a sudden jolt of awareness when God told him to watch for the one upon whom the Spirit would descend. While standing in the Jordan baptizing Jesus, he saw that, and he realized this was the one who was going to bring the Spirit.

Apparently it wasn’t clear to John before. According to this gospel, John didn’t really know that Jesus was the anointed one. But John must have known something about Jesus from his parents, and from Jesus’ parents. The two sets of parents had received a superhuman visitor before the births of John and Jesus, which imparted information about the important missions these two boys, apparently distant cousins, would have. Wouldn’t the parents have handed on something of that story to John and Jesus when they were children? Or perhaps they didn’t repeat the story to their sons, which might explain why John needs to have Jesus’ status confirmed to him.

In the Gospel of Matthew John clearly knows Jesus. When Jesus approaches him to be baptized, John says “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt 3:14). The two gospels seem to have differing sources of information on this, or at least a different emphasis. Maybe John suspected Jesus might be the Messiah, but wasn’t really certain. In the Gospel of John the son of Zebedee, the Baptizer is given information about how to recognize who would bring the Spirit. And once he sees the clue, he is very confident in his declaration, “This is the Son of God” (John 1:34).

It is a very intense and important insight, for John. You can almost hear him saying: “This is really the one. I am certain. You’ve got to recognize this man. He is God’s Son. He will bring the Spirit.”

Now, what is the Spirit like? More specifically, what is *our* experience of the Spirit like? Is it like meeting a magnificent person? Is it like being plugged into a channel or a circuit? Is it like plunging into the sea, being wholly immersed in a new environment? Do we lose our free will and become driven by the Spirit? Is it like feeling a tug, having a magnet or a GPS signal within us that draws us to the source? Or is it like those *Aha* moments when the light seems to shine through, and truth is revealed? It’s not 100% clear what our experience of the Spirit will be like.

What does Jesus say about it that might help us to answer this question? We see him saying that the Spirit will help recall his teachings to the minds of his disciples, and that it will testify of him. This might suggest that the Spirit is like a channel, and that the disciples would hear things or learn things on this channel. In John and in the First Epistle of John, this spirit is called the Spirit of Truth. That also suggests that it is like a channel or a circuit, with truth-content flowing through the circuit that we can pick up.

But it’s not *just* truth-content. The Spirit also seems to have some *personal* qualities, since it comforts people, and does not leave them feeling orphaned. I think our experience of the Spirit is like experiencing the presence of Jesus. The *person* whom we sense is Jesus himself. And he never takes away our free will.

The Spirit also acts like a GPS signal or a magnet, drawing us to Jesus. Thus, the Spirit both points towards truth, and towards the person who opened that truth up to us, namely Jesus himself. Lastly, I would put the emphasis on *experience*. The Spirit of Truth helps us to experience truth in our hearts. It’s not just a mental *knowing*, it is also an emotional or personal *feeling* for our benefactor, Jesus, and our experience of certain values and truths that we *feel* as well as *know*.

I think the Spirit drew me, when I was 19 years old, to accept the invitation of a friend of mine to go to a church, and there I had a born again experience. I felt renewed. I threw away my cigarettes, I suddenly had hope and faith, and some new friends. I was guided, I think, to be studious. I never had a big explosive experience with a heavenly voice, but I prayed for guidance, and over time, I felt that I was receiving it. I could feel the Spirit. I was writing spiritual stories and nonfiction, but not getting published. I started attending scholarly conferences, and decided to enroll in seminary. I think God has guided me to develop my scholarly as well as spiritual inclinations, and I’ve been very fortunate, first, in getting published, and then in being drawn to ministry.

I have a friend who was not raised in a religious household, but always believed in God from an early age. She became a seeker. Without disrespecting her parents, she insisted on following her own guiding light, and found her way to Jesus. She’s a deeply sensitive person who always has something uplifting to say. She has partaken of the Spirit, and Spirit is revealed through her.

A lady named Joy Mead tells the story of how the Spirit led her to help heal a family rift. She knew that her husband Charlie had an aunt and uncle whom he hadn’t seen for years, because of a family argument. Joy felt moved to pray for Uncle Chris and Auntie Pat, and finally she felt she needed to send them a Christmas card, even though her mother-in-law would not want her to do that. Chris and Pat wrote back and thanked her for the card, but said they weren’t ready to meet with them. Joy felt nudged to kept praying and to send a card at Easter, with an invitation to come to lunch. Uncle Chris and Auntie Pat accepted the invitation, and it was the beginning of the healing of the rift. Even Joy’s mother-in-law buried the hatchet and joined in. Joy feels strongly that the Spirit moved her to pray and to send those cards. She writes “don’t give up on the people you know that need the Father’s healing and forgiveness” (<https://restandchaos.com/when-the-holy-spirit-leads/>).

In summary, I want to say a few things about what the Spirit does. One thing the Spirit does is help us to avoid fearful and panicy conclusions about the human race, or any inclination to blame and condemn people.

Among other things, the Spirit of Truth is a spirit of hope and joy. The Spirit sponsors real spiritual progress in the world. It does not foster dogmatism, stubbornness, or bigotry. It fosters life, love, and progress. It leads us into the path of the discovery of living truth, inseparable from a discovery of Jesus himself. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). We need to discover the resurrection and the life here and now in our lives.

And so I wish to bless you in your life here and now, wishing the best of the experience of daily discovery of love and truth, which are evidence of the Spirit in our lives. May you keep rediscovering hope and joy, and grow in the certainty of God’s love. May it illuminate your activities and your words.