

## **The Quiet and Gentle Giving of the Holy Spirit By Reverend Litton Logan**

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### **Scriptures:**

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

**John 20:19-23 (NRSVA)**

### **Introduction:**

The minister of a rather conservative church, although he privately enjoyed a glass of wine now and again, had a passion for peach brandy.

One of his congregants would make and give him a big bottle each Christmas. However, one year, when the minister went to visit his friend and parishioner, hoping for his usual Christmas present, it came with a condition. That condition being, that the minister had to publicly thank him for his peach brandy from the pulpit on Sunday.

The minister, despite knowing his conservative congregation, reluctantly agreed. So, come Sunday the minister remembered he had to make a public announcement that he was being supplied with booze by a member of the church. That morning, his peach-brandy-benefactor sat in the church with a grin on his face, enjoying the minister's discomfort and waiting to see the minister's embarrassment.

The minister stepped up to the pulpit and said, "Before we begin, I have an announcement. I would very much like to thank my friend, Joe, for his kind gift of peaches and for the spirit in which they were given!"

### **Sermon:**

The author of the Gospel of John, writing some sixty years after the resurrection to a community of Jesus-confessing Israelites outside of Palestine, is obviously not interested in giving another biographical narrative of Jesus' life. The author of John's Gospel interprets God's power and presence in Jesus' life and teachings from within what we might call a highly mystical and cosmic context.

As I have said before, the author was familiar not only with emerging post-Temple, rabbinic understandings of the Israelite faith, which he views as his nemesis, but also with the pervasive Greek philosophical and Gnostic thought-worlds of the day. In fact, John's vehicle for articulating his unique understandings of God's saving revelation in Jesus the Christ to a Hellenistic, Israelite community was through the Stoic concept of the Logos or the creative wisdom and purposes of the cosmic mind. The Logos, God's creative reason and purposes that spoke or breathed creation into being becomes incarnate in Jesus as his guiding and defining purpose. "That purpose being, [as we read in John 20:31 is] that you [Jesus' disciples and

John's people, and later the larger world of others] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you [they, we] may have life in his name" (20:31).

In John's Gospel, the powers of this world, which sought to thwart God's purposes in Jesus, have been defeated, and stand under God's judgment through the crucifixion and resurrection. John understands that a significant part of what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do requires the essential force within Jesus to return to God. However, God is not willing that the followers of Jesus be left without an immediate, powerful, and personal presence of the Holy.

As Jesus said earlier in the Gospel of John, he will ask God to send another Holy One, one who will help the disciples recall Jesus' teachings and continue to strengthen and comfort his disciples as well as those who come to belief into Jesus through them, which, given the date of John's writing, was most likely John and his community of faith. Therefore, this One from God, the Spirit of Truth, will call people not only to belief in God's saving power and presence in the truly human and truly divine Jesus, but sustain, encourage, and empower them to face opposition not only from within their local and greater Israelite communities but later the powers and forces of a larger world.

Today we've heard Jesus making good on his promise to his disciples to send them or give them one like himself. In John's Gospel, there is no big display of power and preaching in foreign tongues as we find in Acts with the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we've heard, some of Jesus' disciples, not necessarily his intimate circle of disciples, are gathered in a closed and locked room because they are afraid of the Jewish leadership, who had the authority and power to seize and punish them just as they had Jesus. This would also have been the case in John's Jesus-community as well. Suddenly, the glorified, resurrected Jesus appears to these frightened disciples. Jesus initially greets his disciples with a standard greeting and bids them peace; however, later we will see Jesus utter this same benediction and breath on them, telling them to receive the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word, (ἐμφυσᾶω, *emphysao--em-fü-sä'-ō*) rendered "breathe upon" or "blow upon" is used only here in the New Testament. It is a Greek translation of a Hebrew word (*נָפַח, naphach--nä-fakh'*) that is found in Genesis 2:7, where God breathed into first humans the breath of life. In John's mind, with the coming of Jesus as the Logos, we have a second creation event that in some respects rivals the first. In this new beginning; the Word - the Logos, the reason and purpose of God incarnate in Jesus - breathes new life into those fearful disciples. Now with this gentle, non-ostentatious giving of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples are born anew, children of a higher truth in God. They are the new Israel, the new elect of God, and they share in the same relationship with God as did Jesus.

A thing that I find interesting is that so many Christians understand their faith primarily through the lenses of the Johannine, Jesus-God-Man perspective and thereby, unintentionally I am sure, discount each of the other Gospel writers' unique take on who and what Jesus was and his mission. This is the case except in the giving of or the coming of the Holy Spirit. Most people tend to view the Holy Spirit in its unique witness to Jesus from within the Luke-Acts tradition or the writings of the Apostle Paul. Why? I think that is obvious - the Acts account is much more dramatic, powerful, and sensational. However, such ecstatic expressions of the Spirit were problematic and disruptive in the community of faith in Corinth some twenty-to-twenty-five years earlier than the Pentecost event in Luke-Acts. I add that religious exuberance and ecstatic forms of expressions in worship have been problematic in most religions as far back as we have records.

Therefore, I think it is important, especially for those of us not into emotional displays of our faith, not to overlook this quiet and gentle giving of the Holy Spirit in John's gospel and what it may mean with deference to the more sensational account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts.

Therefore, in John's Gospel, let us understand that the primary work of the Holy Spirit, The Spirit of Truth, is to call the world, i.e. the world of the Israelites at the time, to a revelation of Christ as the Messiah and to enable them to comprehend the temporal and cosmic implications of Christ's person and his purpose. With the formal rejection of Jesus as the Christ by what we've come to call Judaism in the closing years of the first-century of the Common Era, John's time, the Holy Spirit is understood to have moved on. The Holy Spirit now works to bless all peoples by helping them to see not only the wisdom of Jesus' life and teachings, but the Truth as to who and what he was and is for all people for all times.

This brings us to a difficult and often confusing passage in today's scriptures, verse 23.

*<sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*

We must understand that sin here in John's Gospel is a two-fold, theological failing, not moral transgression. Furthermore, the overarching reality of sin was and is always relational - offenses against the self, others, and God. John's audience clearly understood sin, its causes, its consequences, and scriptural remedies for sin, although without the Temple and its sacrificial cult, some aspects of the personal and corporate nature of sin was under review. Thus, the sin John is talking about is in the main - simply a person's or people's rejecting or missing the mark in understanding God's latest self-sacrificing and saving work in Jesus the Christ and their offenses against Jesus' disciples and Jesus confessing communities of faith.

In the giving of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus now have the power and authority to determine orthodoxy; that is, right beliefs and practices. If people offend the faith community, its beliefs, and practices out of ignorance or willfulness, they sin against the disciples. If the offenders come around to right thinking, then those offenses may be forgiven. However, if the faith community chooses not to forgive; that is, retain the offense because it perceives the offenders as continuing in error and offense, then the offenders are personae non-grata for the Jesus group and God until they come around to right thinking and behaving and ask forgiveness. With these instructions and caveats in mind, Jesus commissions his disciples and their communities of faith to continue his work, which includes not only his pronouncements of salvation, but his acts of healing, and judgment.

The faith community's mission - ancient, modern and future - is to bear unceasing witness to the love of God made known in Jesus. Once, with the help of the Holy Spirit, a person is convinced of God's power and presence in Jesus as the Christ, the Holy Spirit will aid them in living and witnessing for Christ and maintaining their communities of faith's during difficult and uncertain times.

I have often heard people say that they want a Spirit filled life. They want to be fully possessed by the Holy Spirit and empowered to do mighty works for God. However, sadly, with a little time and closer examination, I have seen what some spirit-seeking people want is simply a feel-good experience or a temporary ecstatic escape from their lives, not the power and presence of God that will totally transform them into people willing to confront, comfort, and heal the world through God's love and grace. To this I add, that it doesn't take much biblical

research to see that those people in scripture, who were possessed of the Spirit of God often ran afoul of the powers that be to their detriment, albeit to the glory of the kingdom of God.

Many folks, I think, want the "spirit" or an emotional or liberating expression in praise music, charismatic and ecstatic prayer meetings, and great healing services, but Holy Spirit-Spirit of Truth stay away from me, when it comes time to speak God's words of loving judgment on the lives of family, friends, community, country, or the world. No, sir, I don't want to be doing any of this radical, self-expenditure or self-sacrifice stuff. That foolishness can get you killed or kicked out on the street in the cold. Nope, I want just enough of the Spirit to let me know I am safely ensconced in a positive after-life but not so much as to call me to self-expending or self-sacrificing love for God, neighbor, or my own moral and spiritual integrity.

Yet, that is what we are called to do - continue Jesus' work of confronting the darkness of this world and its penchant to breed evil, corruption, and death with the light of God in Jesus Christ. And, Jesus as an Israelite, his disciples as Israelites, were called to confront the abuses, indifferences, and errors of main stream religious thought of their day, as we are called to do so in our day. Amid such work, the Spirit will descend upon us and help us muster courage, conviction, strength, and divine recall to be true to God's words and claim on our lives. We will in the Truth of God find guidance and see a greater purpose in our lives beyond ourselves and our sense of things. That is the truest presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and its power unto life and it more abundantly, now and forevermore.

I have often asked myself this question: Do I want more of the presence of Holy Spirit in my life? Do I want to move up to a higher level in my relationship with God beyond simply doing my personal religious thing or believing that Jesus is the Christ of God for my personal salvation? This question and the thoughts it evokes in me at times brings fear to my heart and mind, but then I remember Jesus' words: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus' first pronouncement of "Peace or Shalom be with you", as I said, could be seen as a standard greeting and benediction and was meant to convey the ideas of blessing, prosperity, and health. The term was also meant to denote friendship and to call a person to relax, turn loose of any unrest, anxiety, and dissatisfaction in their hearts and minds. The great prophets Isaiah and Micah pictured the time of the Messiah as being a time when all peoples, creatures, and creation would be united in the ways of God, anxiety free, prosperity and healing available to all, and a time when God's ways would judge between the nations and there would be universal peace, no longer strife among the nations or war on earth.

So, Jesus the resurrected Messiah, Prince of Peace, now pronounces his benediction of peace on his friends to inspire them - in spirit them - to surrender their fear and anxiety, as he commissions them to continue his work with the confidence of God's power and presence with them. So, let us in the Peace of Christ continue Jesus' work.

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