

Come Holy Spirit **Acts 2:1-21**

When I first came to Asbury UMC, I said, “I wish it is the day of Pentecost so that I don’t have to worry about my broken English.” Do you remember that? Though I still speak broken English, it’s surely the Day of Pentecost. On this day, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that we are often puzzled when we are asked “Do you hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you?”

I don’t know if you know this or not, but all clergy are required to take a psychological evaluation. I also took my psychological assessment a few years ago. A part of this assessment is to fill out long questionnaires for several hours. I still remember one question that I had to struggle with. The question was “Do you hear a spirit speaking to you?” The intention of the question is clear. Right? Such a question in a psychological evaluation intends to determine whether a person has some kind of auditory hallucinations. As a pastor, I had to struggle if I should answer “Yes” or “No” since I confess the Holy Spirit who speaks to us today. Do you know how I answered? Of course, I answered ‘Yes’ because I believe in the work of the Holy Spirit.

But we have to admit that the work of the Holy Spirit is most often misunderstood because we cannot objectively see God’s Spirit working among us, similar to how we cannot see the wind. Like the wind, we cannot see the Holy Spirit with our eyes but we can feel and see the effects of the Holy Spirit.

We, United Methodists believe that “The Holy Spirit is God's present activity in our midst. When we sense God's leading, God's challenge, or God's support or comfort, we say that it's the Holy Spirit at work.”¹ Some people may have had an extraordinary experience with the Holy Spirit, similar to a strong gust of wind. It’s an experience so powerful that it changed their whole lives at once. Other people may have felt the gentle touch of the Holy Spirit similar to a gentle summer breeze that comforts one in the midst of turmoil. The Holy Spirit is so free that we are not able to restrain its flow or completely comprehend the works of the Spirit.

So when we talked about our personal experience of the Holy Spirit, first of all, we must be humble. We must be humble before God’s Spirit and never claim that our own experience of the Holy Spirit is the only correct one. Rather, we should humbly open ourselves to the mystery of the Holy Spirit. Keeping this cautionary remark in mind, let us talk about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit

Today’s scripture is the most quoted biblical passage concerning the Holy Spirit. It tells us about a powerful and dramatic image of the Spirit coming to the disciples of Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost. But the work of the Holy Spirit did not begin on the day of Pentecost. The work of the Holy Spirit began from the moment of creation.

Both the Hebrew and Greek words for the Holy Spirit originally means “breath or wind.” When God made man from dust, God breathed the breath of life into man who then became a living being. Dust was nothing but it became something... something very important... something very precious. It became the image of God when God breathed the breath of life into man.

If we relate this story of Genesis with the story of Acts, we can read today’s scripture as the moment of God breathing the breath of life into the disciples. I can say that Jesus’ disciples

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/our-christian-roots-the-holy-spirit>

may have been less than average people. As we all know, Jesus' disciples were ignorant so they never understood Jesus' teaching. They were faithless so they repeatedly doubted Jesus even though they saw many extraordinary miracles. They were cowards so they abandoned their teacher when their lives were threatened. They were useless, faithless,... and they were nothing.

However, as dust transformed into the image of God by receiving the breath of life, the disciples of Jesus became God's new creation with the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit, the breath of life, was poured out to them, they become something... something very important... something very precious. They become the body of Christ, the Church. The day of Pentecost is the birthday of the church.

What does a baby first do right after birth? They cry. Regardless of who we are as a person today, we all cried when we first came into this world... although we do not remember it. A baby crying is a sign that the baby is able to breathe on its own. It is also a sign of life.

Like a newborn baby, the church, right after its birth, cried out loud. When people were filled with the Holy Spirit, "they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak." But more importantly, the first breath of the newborn church was filled with the powerful proclamation of the mighty works of God. They declared that the day of the Lord is coming and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

As the breath of life filled the hearts of the disciples, they could not hide themselves in a corner. As they received God's Spirit, the fear of persecution or public humiliation became nothing to them. 120 disciples went out into the streets and declared the good news. People from whole nations listened to their witnessing in their own languages and about three thousand people became Christians. This is one of the most dramatic scenes depicting the incredible power and works of the Holy Spirit.

Breath the breath of the life

Do you think what has happened in today's scripture is really possible or is it just a biblical story? Honestly, it is not easy to believe a biblical story as it is.

But what happened in the early church continues to happen throughout history. The history of the Korean Methodism began in 1884. Do you think that Koreans readily accepted Christianity? The answer is 'no!' Korean people were cautious of these strange people with blue eyes who spread word of a western-ghost. Of course, the American missionaries' broken Korean may have made their work of sharing the gospel much more difficult. (I completely understand their struggle.)

For the first 20 years, the church did not grow well. But the Korean church began rapidly growing since 1903. Do you know why? It was because of one man's inner conversion by receiving the Holy Spirit. The great revival movement of Korea started with one person, a Methodist missionary, Robert Hardie and his experience of the Holy Spirit.

Hardie worked very hard but his labor did not bear much fruit so he grew very frustrated. The church did not grow and Korean believers did not really seem to change. Everything seemed to be the same or getting worse since he had worked in Korea. When things do not go well, people tend to blame their own failures on other people. Hardie was no exception. He complained about the unfavorable socio-political situation of Korea that made it difficult to do missionary works. He complained that the Koreans were ignorant, immoral and untrustworthy so that they were not able to understand the gospel. He blamed situations. He blamed Koreans for the failure of his mission.

In the midst of Hardie's struggle, he was invited to lead a bible study for female missionaries. He needed to prepare a sermon relating to prayer. During his time of preparation, God led him to the gospel of John chapter 14, 15, and 16, in which Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit. As he read and deeply reflected on the gospel, the Holy Spirit inspired him to see within himself. This is his actual confession.

"As I prepared my addresses, I realized that I would not be honest in giving them, because I had not the faith spoken of in the first text... because I as well as my hearers knew that I did not live an abiding life, and because I was unwilling to confess my need of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, though I had sought it for years."

Hardie realized that the real reason for his failures was not the situations and other people. But it was he himself, having not sought out the fullness of the Holy Spirit. As he encountered and honestly repented his sins, he also experienced the touch of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, this was not the end. The Holy Spirit led him to confess his sins to the local church and other missionaries. He said that it was a painful and humiliating experience. But he followed the lead of the Holy Spirit. "On the Sunday morning, with shame and confusion of faith, Hardie confessed his pride, hardness of heart and unbelief, and sought forgiveness from individuals and the Korean congregation as a whole. The assembled Koreans saw for the first time what conviction and repentance meant in an actual experience." Do you know what happened next?

The flame of the Holy Spirit in Hardie's heart ignited the fire of revival in the entire Korean peninsula. During 1904, 10,000 Koreans turned toward God. Just within one year, 10,000 souls believed in Jesus Christ. In 1907, there were about one million and twenty thousand Christians. During the revival meetings, people publicly confessed their sins. So some police officers came to participate in these revival meetings solely to arrest culprits. But the Holy Spirit even poured out onto them and they too became Christians. The life of the Korean Christians radically changed in accordance with the Bible. And it all started with one man receiving the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit Continues to Work Today

The Holy Spirit continues to work among us today. God's Spirit is with us today, though we may not always feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. Since the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic, I have often struggled with the question, "what is church?" The government has deemed church as non-essential business and suspended in-person gathering of the church. We, Christians, say that people need our Christ and they need the church. But it seems that people don't need nor want anything from the church. In fact, the church seems to have little to offer to meet the needs of people. Though Asbury UMC has helped the poor families in Guatemala, honestly, it seems insufficient and insignificant when we consider the situation. As a pastor, I struggled as to what I can do and what our church can do for the world. Honestly, I have felt helpless and a bit discouraged because of this unfavorable situation.

Then, this Day of Pentecost reminds me that we do not work with our own strengths... and we shouldn't work with our own powers. Rather it is the power of the Holy Spirit that we have to rely on for our work. It is the Holy Spirit who sustains us and empowers us to do God's work.

We are weak but our God is strong. We are unwise but the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. so let us first confess our need of the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Seek for the Holy Spirit, nothing else.

Asbury UMC is navigating how we can safely reopen the church. Simply opening the church building isn't enough. In fact, in-person gathering is important but it may not be essential for the church as we have experienced for the past 2 months.

Essential is saving lives. Essential is loving our God and neighbors. Essential is acts of kindness in the midst of hate and bigotry. Essential is helping our brothers and sisters of color who plea "I can't breathe." Essential is embracing others as our brothers and sisters even if they are different from us. Essential is sharing our lives and possessions with those in need. What else is essential?

Please think about what is essential for the church and how Asbury UMC will be essential for our community again. While you reflect on it, please remember we are able to be essential for the world only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Make room in your heart for the Holy Spirit. Listen carefully and let the Spirit of God remold us... use us and lead us to be essential church for the kingdom of God. Amen.