

HOW DO WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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"The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Genesis 1:2

"The voice of the Lord is over the waters." Psalm 29:3

"When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them." Acts 19:6

"Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Mark 1:10-11.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

There's a deep hunger in mainline churches to experience the reality of God, not God as an abstract idea or as the object of study, but God as a living person; God, the source of our life; God, the source of love; God, the creator of heaven and earth who has come to us personally in the Lord Jesus Christ; a God who speaks to us and brings about a new creation in us. There's a hunger to know God and to hear God's voice say to us, "You are my beloved child. Despite what you have done or failed to do. Despite what you believe or cannot believe. Despite who or what you are, you belong to me. I am very pleased with you. I have created you. I have redeemed you. I am beginning a new creation in you."

I've noticed a growing hunger for God over the years in the church and in my own life. When I was in seminary 35 years ago there was not *one* course in prayer or spiritual development or religious experience. We received no instruction on how to nourish our souls, nothing on daily prayer, nothing on spiritual disciplines such as fasting. In fact, religious experience was not something we Presbyterians did back then. We left religious experiences to Methodists and Pentecostals and Nazarenes. *We* were really into knowing God *with our minds*. So we studied Greek and Hebrew and Philosophy and Church History. And we talked *about* God and we wrote papers *about* God far, far more than we spoke *to* God in prayer or simply just listened to the voice of God. We were like the father of Carl Jung, the great psychologist, who said of his Reformed minister father, "He talked about God like a man who had never seen an elephant talks about elephants."

Today *all* that has changed. Every Presbyterian Seminary offers classes in spiritual development. Presbyterian seminarians learn how to pray and fasting and listen *for* the voice of God. Our seminaries are every bit as intellectually challenging, but now there's a new dimension of spirituality. Men and women go to seminary after ten or twenty years in business because they've become hungry for God. The average age of a seminarian is forty years old now. Men and women are leaving their professions as stock brokers and lawyers and going to seminary. One stock broker who achieved financial security recently left Wall Street and entered Princeton Seminary. He wrote in the Princeton alumni magazine, "I've always believed in Christ but I felt a spiritual hunger."

Several weeks ago I received a Christmas letter from a colleague in ministry. He is *not* a Presbyterian. A handwritten note said: "Ted: I'm off to San Francisco (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in January to begin a three-year diploma program in 'The Art of Spiritual Direction.' Pray that the Lord will protect me from Marin County, new-age, Presbyterians who are interested in 'spirituality.'" Thirty years ago I never even heard the term *spiritual direction*. Now I hear the term everywhere. Non-Presbyterians are coming to our seminaries to know God.

Throughout the nation and within the church there's a growing hunger for God. Some people try to satisfy their hunger on spiritual junk food - seances, new-age spirituality, spiritual navel gazing and so forth. Others, though, are eating more healthy spiritual food. They're not only studying the Word of God in Scripture, they're listening to the voice of God in Scripture. They ^{of obeying.} practice the ancient spiritual discipline of *lectio divina*, taking time to read and meditate on the Word of God in silence and solitude. ^{And their time with God is directing them out of themselves and back into the world to serve God.} ^(Think of Melissa Clump's work... mission trip...) When God feeds our hunger we're led by God's Spirit to witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ, to heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, clothe the naked, welcome the outcast and call the dead to life.

One of the most influential people in this new found search for spiritual reality is Princeton professor, Dr. Diogenes Allen. Diogenes Allen, professor of philosophy, is a brilliant intellect, and a Spirit filled man. In one of his more recent books, *Spiritual Theology*, he speaks of his hunger for God early in his ministry that led him, eventually, to stress knowing God as well as knowing about

God. He writes, "In spite of my religious faith (back then), the ability to preach sermons and to give lectures that were as good (or bad) as those of the next person, *most of the time God seemed remote*. Although I had a doctorate in philosophy and theology, and had read a lot of books, I did not really know what it meant to have an awareness of God in daily life, or how one went about achieving it. How was it that in all my church attendance and advanced education I had not learned such an elementary matter?" Dr. Allen's spiritual hunger led him to rediscover ancient spiritual disciplines and seek to know God with his heart as well as with his mind.

God wants us to know God. Of course, God wants us also to know *about* God. To talk *about* God. To think *about* God. But, above all, God wants us to encounter God. Human beings aren't one dimensional creatures. We're not just embodied intellects. We have a mind to know. We also have a heart to love and a will to act. God wants us to know, love and serve God as well as think and talk about God.

Knowing God is like knowing a person. We can't know God or other persons by following four easy steps. I wish I could give you four easy steps to experiencing God. Four spiritual laws for receiving the Holy Spirit. There *is* a little booklet that outlines four easy steps to knowing God. Thousands of people have found the booklet helpful. But for me knowing God is like getting to know a person. You spend time together. You listen. You sit in silence as well as talk. Often we get to know another by listening to the silence between the words. Most of us would be a bit put off if someone handed us a booklet outlining four easy steps to get to know someone to whom we feel attracted. Every person I know is a deep, unfathomable mystery. We never know our friends and spouses exhaustively. There are not four steps but four million steps to knowing a person. There's always more to discover. Our knowledge of God is like that. But we *can* know God. We can know God as we know another human being, as a mystery to be discovered day by day as long as we live.

Presbyterians are heirs of a rich theological heritage. National statistics show Presbyterians are better educated than any other denomination. We're better educated than Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians. Better educated than any denomination in the world. Nevertheless,

there's a deep and growing hunger for God - not a hunger for more and more information - but for the reality of God. I share that hunger, I want to know God in my experience -- in my heart as well as head. And I would consider the sermon a success to the degree it awakens a hunger in all of us to know God better.

A woman recently told her pastor, "I have this recurrent nightmare. I had it again last night. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

In the dream, I die and find myself standing before the house of God. When I knock, the door blows open and it's clear no one has lived there for a very long time. The place is vacant. There are dust balls everywhere." She had a look of grief. "All I want is to hear God call me by name. I would give anything just to hear God say my name."

I believe we all long to hear God call us by name. And God does call us by name. Sometimes the radio is playing too loudly and we don't hear his voice. Sometimes listening to God may be like listening to another person at a noisy party. Other people may interrupt. But we hear as we're attentive and relaxed. God speaks to us many times in various ways and above all in Jesus Christ. God speaks to us this morning. He speaks to our newly elected elders and deacons. He says, "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased." He gives you Holy Spirit to carry out your tasks. And when you kneel for the laying on of hands, the weight you feel is the burden of love the Holy Spirit lays upon you, to share with others.

Almighty God,
you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your beloved Son.
Keep us, your children born of water and the Spirit,
faithful in your service,
that we may rejoice to be called children of God;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.