

Numbers 11: 24-30; John 7: 37-39, Acts 2: 1-21
Olivet Church, Charlottesville, June 4, 2017

Would That All the Lord's People Were Prophets

“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.” We may have too restricted of an understanding of prophets to appreciate this wish expressed by Moses in our reading from the book of Numbers. We think of prophets and prophecy as foretelling the future. Or we think of prophets as social critics who call for a more just economy and social order.

But in the Bible a prophet is one upon whom God’s Spirit rests, so that they may speak and live out God’s word in their day and their culture. This certainly involves speaking of God’s future judgment and redemption, and critiquing the ways a society is ordered contrary to what God desires. But a prophet is not a mere predictor of future events or critic of current ones.

Another difficulty we have in embracing Moses’ wish is that we may be frightened, or put off, by the more emotional and ecstatic expressions of the Spirit’s blessing in the life of the believer. In our Old Testament reading, as well as the story from the Acts of the Apostles, the coming of the Spirit is marked with ecstatic speech; with prophesy and with speaking in tongues.

Recently I was reading a brief biography of a Christian leader of the last century in which he shared that at his birth he did not start breathing on his own. So the doctor gave him a little whack on the behind and as his family told it, “he let out a scream that was heard throughout the county.”

We are all born from above, born of God, born anew by water and the Spirit into a new and qualitatively different life in Christ. But we don’t all necessarily scream, prophesy, or speak in tongues at our new birth. Many of us have been slowly, patiently, and persistently nurtured into that new life in Christ over time by our families, communities of faith, and nudgings of God’s Spirit in our life experiences such that we can’t remember a day when we did not know we were a beloved child of God, forgiven and freed, and empowered to live for God in the world.

We need not be frightened or put off by the more ecstatic, sensational manifestations of the coming of the Spirit into the life of a believer. And we need not think that they are necessary indicators of our new birth and salvation. In fact you find the Apostle Paul dressing down those more spirit-filled individuals in the early church had become prideful and self-righteousness, and consequently had divided and weakened the church.

Yet at the same time, we must not think that the coming of the Spirit into the life of a believer is optional. The Spirit is the active, living presence of Christ that enables belief; turning theological concepts into heartwarming and heartfelt convictions. It is the active, living presence of Christ that bestows gifts for service to the church and its mission in the world. It is the active, living presence of Christ that turns fear and timidity into courageous witness to Christ and his kingdom. It is the active, living presence of Christ that transforms our character to produce the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control. It is the active, living presence of Christ that facilitates prayer, provides guidance and courage for speaking and living the word of God in our day and culture.

As I mentioned last week, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were both written by Luke. And at the beginning of Jesus' ministry described in the gospel of Luke the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus and he proclaims in his hometown synagogue, the Spirit has anointed him to "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And at the beginning of the ministry of the church described in the Book of Acts, the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus' followers at Pentecost, transforming them, empowering them, freeing them, and guiding them into bold witness throughout the Roman Empire, sharing the good news of Jesus in ways that people understand in their own language and culture. Jesus' ministry begins with the gift of the Spirit. The church's ministry begins with the gift of the Spirit.

And so it is in the life of the individual. Paul says in 1st Corinthians 12, "no one can make the profession, Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior apart from the work of the Spirit." Faith is not the final outcome of an intellectual pursuit, but an experience of our Maker coming among us by his spirit to quicken our hearts and convict our minds with the truth of the gospel, that "God so loved us and the world that he gave his only begotten son so that we might not perish but have everlasting life."

In our Old Testament lesson it appears that the Spirit of the Lord is a limited or fixed commodity. Some of the spirit has to be taken from Moses in order to allocate it to others. Yet even then the Spirit overflows, spills over a bit, and does its work outside the rules of government and established ordination procedures as Eldad and Medad are stricken with the spirit and begin to prophesy back in the camp. "My Lord, Moses, stop them," the vice-prophet Joshua shouts to Moses. But Moses, more fully aware of, and burdened with, the needs of the people and conditions of life, says in effect, "we need all the help God can give us; would that all of God's people were prophets."

As we are reminded by Peter's speech in Acts, the prophet Joel spoke of a time when the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh; a generous, abundant, indiscriminate, raining down of the Spirit of God. And it would be the sign of the final time, the last days before God's coming in loving judgment to restore the world to the bounty, goodness, justice, and peace God intends.

And so on Jesus' followers, who according to verse 15 in chapter one of Acts, including many women and numbered about 120 persons, the Spirit was poured out. It sounded like a violent wind. It looked like tongues of fire whipping around and resting on each one present. On all, old and young, women and men, leaders and followers, slaves and free the Spirit was poured out. Their new birth by the Spirit was accompanied by ecstatic speech enabling these Galilean bumpkins to be understood by people of all language groups as they spoke of God redeeming work in Christ. It was an auspicious moment with Jews gathered in the streets below from language groups and nations around the Mediterranean for the festival of Pentecost.

Some questioned, and some scoffed. But Peter quickly interpreted the event as the fulfillment of the end-time prophesy of the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh. "In the last days it will be,

God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ’