

Anticipating the Spirit

Menno Mennonite Church

December 8, 2024

Purpose: To connect with our sense of the Spirit as something that we not only wait for but wait with.

Message: The days of God's Spirit outflowed are already here even as we anticipate it yet to be/

Scripture: Joel 2:23-29 [I will read]; Luke 11:5-13 (please read)

Synopsis: Spirit is a word and condition suffering from over familiarity. We celebrate our school spirit, conflating our support for the home team with the sense of unity this can produce (along with the appropriate objects to show it). We speak of our spirit as a general sense of well being, or the ability to capture the social mood of a given season.

But when it comes to the Spirit (noting the capitalization) we often place this state within that on which we still wait. Our theology may not say this, but our behavior often does. The good news is this: these post-Pentecost days are indeed the very days the prophet has spoken of. Even as we anticipate the fullness of God's Spirit moving with us, we also rest assuredly with the promise of God's Spirit acting with us each and every day. How might we best trust this and act within it?

Joel 2:23-29

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;

for YHWH has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again
be put to shame.

Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

These are days of spirit. Spirit, a word suffering from rather profound over use, is in the area. It begins early with the invoking of getting into the want-to-be campy Halloween Spirit and the invitation to decorate early and often. Then we are invited to welcome the spirit of the season with the appropriate diet, apparel, wonder, music, and all the rest. The invitation is to join ourselves to the festivities and it is a welcome one. There is much here to enjoy. But it goes beyond that. We have been inducted at our house into Spirit Week, where the wearing of red and black is all but mandated. And of course, Spiritual, but not religious is the description that more and more people are picking for themselves and their spirituality. Basically if it is a moment around which people can gather with intent and passion there too people of appropriate spirit can gather. The word has been plastered on everything from genuinely pious faith to those with an enthusiasm for what ever meme craze happens to be spreading on the internet.

Which leaves us wondering perhaps what all this actually means. For all the rather diverse and somewhat hard to define meanings of the word, “spirit” – the shared sense of purpose and passion—is contagious and compelling. We all have been to events where we are caught by the moment and sentiment of the time, brought well beyond our normal way and into something bigger than itself. The shared experience itself has power to transform and bring out behavior that we might not usually see. I remember attending a Notre Dame football game with a seminary friend of mine whose wife was studying law in South Bend at the same time. We got to sit in the student section with a great view of touchdown Jesus off to our left. I don’t remember much of the actual game, but I do remember the ways and means of the crowd, working together within an undocumented but universally understood choreography. The wind up for kick off. Standing and jangling your car keys (when you still had those) as part of distraction for the third down. The chants that were led when someone actually scored. It made me think a lot about the power of liturgy (I was a seminary student and it is a Catholic school after all) and the ways that that spirit had the way to sweep so many to who knows where.

If you are wondering about the prophetic work of Joel, I would not blame you. By in large this is the citation that we know of the book, which, by the way, is the happy bit of what he has to say on behalf of YHWH. The rest declares the judgement of YHWH against the people. We don’t know much of the prophet specifically, with most scholarship dating the book into the Babylonian exile around 585 BC. Joel declares the day of the Lord with the destruction to go with it, and calls the people to repentance in the midst of that day. Destruction, it is declared,

belongs with God and God alone, and the ways of the people support this judgement. It is this promise of recompense beyond the day of the Lord—the healing of the nation after the catastrophe of the nation is really what we carry from Joel, mostly because it is the reference we connect mostly to ourselves. We read the promises of Joel’s restoration narrative into the Christian experience, and connect ourselves here to the experience of Pentecost. That and it is so good and generous in the promises it portends.

In the history of God’s people there had been the outpouring of God’s Spirit – the one with the capital S – but it was also a fairly particular and special thing to happen. There were the movers and shakers of Israel society who were sufficient messianic and anointed to be identified with the working of YHWH. Abraham, Issac, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Elisha, David—the all time all stars of the story of God and God’s people. But that was about it. In fact it was precisely this discrepancy between the expectation that was held for those in whom God’s Spirit dwelt and the characteristic behaviors that Jesus portrayed routinely that so got him into trouble. His crime was claiming an anointing that the powers that be could not and would not understand. These things were royal, priestly and prophetic offices with all the trappings and Jesus did fit those criteria. What was more, Jesus claimed that anointing that was his from the very first, and then took that same anointing and declared that this very day of Lord of which Joel speaks had now come and the anointing is here and now.

Because that is precisely what is here. We encounter Joel as a text that describes the way that things will be in the by and by, pointing to the future realization of what will be. It was how it was spoken to Israel and now is one more something that we have to look forward to in a remote future yet to be. Young and old, boys and girls, men and women, the likely and the unlikely: everybody was going to have a Spirit descend on them that would open up visions and dreams and ways of understanding God and God’s kingdom that had simply not been available on the popular level at any prior time. There would be great wonders for all to see as God would work on Earth and in the heavens and they would understand the grand scheme of things of what YHWH is doing.

This indeed is something to look forward to and anticipate, the understanding of the working of the Spirit especially, I think. Because we are so given to forgetting that the days about which Joel spoke are with us and ongoing even to this very day. Joel does indeed speak of Pentecost and the day when the Holy Spirit would infuse every member of the church in ways

that can and will change everything. But friends, here's the thing—the word of YHWH that declare the Spirit's outpouring “in those days” are in fact also THESE Days. Some centuries after those words were spoken, Peter declared that these days were here and those days have never ceased to be ever since. Across the nearly two millennia of church history and even unto this very day the Spirit has been at work within the hearts of billions of believers near and far bringing about the way of kingdom in ways both profound and dramatic and quiet and unnoticed.

We live in this epoch of Spirit, something that so many have longed to see, but sometimes we miss it all together. The Spirit of God is poured into us believers somewhat like oxygen: the stuff that is so part of the atmosphere that we take it for granted that it is there and good, nothing much remarkable about it whatsoever. Worse still we can wonder whether we have received our dose of Spirit sense if we are not doing or being or saying that which gets characterized as particularly charismatic. If there is one solid critique of Anabaptist life and thought is that we, especially we of the Northern flavor of the faith, have an under developed sense of the way and working of the Spirit in the world. We do what we do and are who we are because it is who we are and how we function. We are far more given to crediting that which we do to our heritage and up bringing than we are to the conviction and enabling of the Spirit. But just like our respiration, it is often when we sense its constriction that we can notice its presence. Noticing our breathing takes intention and connection, often the time of minutes to begin to capture what is going on. Sometimes we are only really aware of our need of breath when we wake a 3 AM with stuffy sinuses that don't let us seem to catch a full lungful of air.

But that doesn't mean it is not there nor unfunctional. We live in these days and while we may note that dreams and visions are somewhat thin on the ground. But still we testify to the power of prayer and the appreciation of being held in the communities grace in the times that are hard. We can celebrate the fact that we cannot know and we don't have to experience a live absent of the Spirit. We live our lives mostly unaware of the gifts, insights, and abilities that are given us singularly through the Spirit. We don't always know this, and sometimes we can assume that it is our capacity to perform that is more at play than anything else. I can readily say it is usually the times that I think myself horribly clever and incisive that I listen to my words go most profoundly clunk. It is where I look for and to the Spirit—spoken or not—that life is given even beyond the expectations of anything I might have planned.

We likely live unaware and unappreciatively of the Spirit with us. But our lack of consciousness of the facts of the matter is not an excuse to remind ourselves of the facts of the world and how it really works, taking time to not and know the working of Spirit that moves and builds. Advent is the discipline of waiting for what will be, counting down and opening windows of anticipation for what is about to be. But here is something on which we can count in the immediate, and know is ours in the world as it is. We live within the days of Spirit's outpouring—thanks be to God. It is in this that we can move, function, and live lives of faith that we may or may not know as ours of our own choice. Even so we also anticipate that day when the outpouring might reach tidal proportions and all flesh we know and move and sense the delivery of God's Spirit fully known and finally realized. We celebrate what is; we anticipate what will be.

I began remarking at the notion of spirit's over use. I wonder if that is quite right. Perhaps instead we might note the many spirits of the day. Those who would attract us to one ideology or another. Those that would invite us to join the voices of the mean or the fearful. Those which would seek to convince us of our humanity's worth being a function of our success. The list is long and ever complicated. Perhaps the invitation in the midst of the river of all the spirits of the day is to again and carefully breath in the full spirit and its working, drawing from it the strength of God's anointing, holding this as our center core above all others. Perhaps then we will know the fullest dreams yet to be realized by the ever creating God.

May we each know God's Spirit, moving within us, inspiring us ever to new things.
Amen.