

**“Living the Resurrection”, 1 Thessalonians
God’s Empowering Presence [Pentecost Sunday]
1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Acts 2:1-4
6.9.19**



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“If you grew up in some expression of Christian faith formation, how was the Holy Spirit discussed and offered to you? Did you find that his role was ‘downplayed’ (like he was the ‘third-wheel’ of the Trinity)? Did you feel he was over-emphasized to the point of abuse?”

“When Jesus told the disciples that it would actually be to their advantage that he would go away and send the Comforter (John 16:7), how do you think that message was received? What do you think that means for us, today? How are we at an advantage over early followers who were actually present with Jesus?”

“Is there a situation/relationship in your life in which the Spirit could prove to be a ‘helper’ if you could surrender control?”

“Is there a circumstance in which you are not experiencing the Spirit as ‘advocate’ because you are attempting to defend yourself?”

“How might the Spirit’s desire to ‘lead’ be impeded by your determination to chart your own course?”

“Where, in your own life, have you been able to point to something and say, ‘That was God!’? If not, would you attribute that to a lack of awareness or a lack of experience?”

Teaching Notes...

Deep within all of us are desires for living humanly (flourishing; becoming who we were created to be) which either gets connected to our Creator-God, or attached to any number of seemingly attractive options which leave us dissatisfied and disoriented. [*religio-* to connect; re-ligament]

All “religion” (“spirituality” or “faith”) is an attempt to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. It offers us a “paradigm”; a framework. All religions/faiths, as a result, make “truth-statements” and tell stories based on their conclusions (even to say that all faiths are equally valid is a faith-statement). The story around which we gather, each week, is a decidedly Jewish story.

Whatever else the Jewish people believed to be true of themselves, they believed that they were, “*people of the Presence*”.

“For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth”.

Exodus 33:15-16

This Presence (‘to be face to face with another; to whom you might turn’) is what distinguished a people belonging to God them from “*all the other people(s) on the earth*”. It begins with us in the Garden.

“When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden”. Genesis 3:8

It is offered as God “**tabernacling**” with us, first in a more portable facility (Tent of Meeting) and then to God’s ‘brick and mortar’ location (the Temple).

“Then, let them make a dwelling place for me... I will dwell among them..”

Exodus 25:8

Since God knew how hectic our schedules could become, he wanted to ensure that he made it onto our calendar with some regularity. He required his people to participate in specific feasts/festivals [Exodus 23:17].

Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread): celebrating Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.

Pentecost (Feast of Weeks; Shavout), which occurred 50 days (7-weeks) after Passover.

Tabernacles (Sukkot): everyone built temporary shelters to commemorate their (40)-year camping trip with God.

Pentecost (“fifty days”), was an agricultural festival, celebrating the initial harvest. The “first-fruit”. The celebration was always one of gratitude (for what they were experiencing) and expectancy (what they anticipated).

The Rabbis linked this festival to the giving of the Law which the Jews received at Mount Sinai some (50) days after they had left Egypt.

During the feast, specific portions of the Scripture were being read. According to tradition, those portions included **Exodus 19-20** (story of the display of God's presence at Sinai; Moses 'ascending' to receive the covenant from God) as well as **Ezekiel 1-2** (the return of the Presence, the call to live responsibly).

The Jewish celebrations came to include a more honest recognition that due to their infidelity and failure to live into their chosenness as the unique people of God, his presence had "left the building" (Ezekiel 10-11).

Amidst the aftermath of the cross and resurrection, the "*Messiah, formerly known as dead*", appears to his followers and commands them to stay in Jerusalem and "*wait*" for the promised Holy Spirit who is said to, "*fill them with power from heaven*" (Luke 24).

The Spirit is "person". Personally, is the only way that God can come to us. We use personal pronouns to describe him [although the ancient's use non-personal terminology--- wind, fire, water, oil--- at times, to describe the Holy Spirit's activity among us]. He is not a force into which we 'tap' or a power we are to 'harness', but a person with whom we are to relate.

The Spirit is "presence" ("Spirit of God"; he is the essence of God; everything that makes God, God.) No one knows God but God!

1 Corinthians 2:11 "*... no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit*".

The Spirit is "empowering personal presence". ..."*if I go away...*" John 16:7

parakletos: "comforter" (a being with; help others discern presence),
"counselor", **"advocate"** (voice for the voiceless), **"one called alongside"**.

Jesus didn't say, "*I am going away, but I am leaving you with written instructions and a way to reach me, if necessary*". Jesus can say, "*You know the Spirit*", because they know Jesus. The Spirit is the very life, essence, and personality of Jesus.

Mt. Sinai...

- ✓ Gathered together, attending to God at the mountain.
- ✓ Manifestation of wind, fire, voices (all manner of God-special-effects).
- ✓ 3,000 die to their rebellion and disobedience (Exodus 32:28).
- ✓ Moses ascends the mountain and receives the Law chiseled into stone tablets.

Upper Room (Temple Mount)

- ✓ Gathered in "*one place*", attending to and celebrating the presence of their God.

- ✓ Experience some manifestation of ‘*wind, fire and voices*’ (Hebrew for ‘thunder’ means ‘voices’).
- ✓ Some 3,000 responded to the covenant promise and receive life (2:41).
- ✓ Jesus ascends into heaven and sends the Holy Spirit to write his laws on their hearts.

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ... you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

Ezekiel 36:24-28

1 Corinthians 3:16 *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”*

When Paul, a Jewish rabbi steeped in the narrative, said the word “**temple**”, he had one image in mind. The Temple was “*sacred space*”. In it, was a “thin-veil”, literally and metaphorically. There was not much standing between us and the “other”.

With the coming of the Spirit to ‘temple in us’, Paul would have us to know that...

... the Spirit transforms clay pots into containers of the holy. We are not “merely human”; we are not simply the same old people with a few new God-experiences, we are new creations! We have a new heart, with new God-ward impulses and a new way of thinking about life [2

Corinthians 4:7; 5:17; 2 Peter 1:4]

... the Spirit is the guarantee that God is always at work to restore what all of creation is groaning to be (Romans 8), he will not abandon the process (Philippians 1:6), and that he will not be satisfied until you are whole!

... those in whom the Spirit comes to live are God’s new temple and whatever the people went to discover about God at the Temple, they should now find in us (welcome, community, healing, forgiveness, worship, sacrifice).

We, the church, are the place of “mystery”--- the place of presence.

The church is a people with particular names, in particular places, in particular seasons of history, with particular struggles who determine to learn to function in a particular way: the Jesus way--- the way of love. They are distinguished most appropriately as the “*people of presence*”.

The church always forfeits her uniqueness when she becomes simply a human institution. If what we are experiencing is “always” in the realm of our ability to understand, explain, or micro-manage, we are failing to properly encounter the God who is both “present and perplexing”; “orderly, but never domesticated”.

There must be something of us that people experience which can only have a “God-explanation”; something that people experience through us of which people conclude, “God was here!”

“... if the same Spirit that raised Jesus...” Romans 8:11

I’m not sure I am able to grasp all the implications and possibilities captured in such a statement. I just know that I am tired of having the same frustrated reaction every time I read/hear it.

“Silver and gold, I don’t have, but what I do have, I give you...” (Acts 3) There is a truth to that statement, isn’t there? We give out of (draw out from) what we have (believe we have) Peter and John knew the limitations of their fiscal resources, but the unlimited possibilities of the Spirit.