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The Difference the Holy Spirit Makes
Acts 2:1-21, 37-47

It's one of my favorite stories in the prophets, that passage that was read earlier in our service today.

Nearly 2,600 years ago, in a vision the prophet Ezekiel stood in a valley full of the dry bones of soldiers killed in battle. The LORD asked him, "Son of man, can these bones live?"¹

Ezekiel replied, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

Then the LORD commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to those bones that the LORD would cause breath to enter them and they would again live. In the vision, that's just what happened—bones began to rattle, then come together. Tendons came on them, then flesh, then skin covered them. But there was still no life in them.

Then the LORD commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath to come from the four winds, and as it did, those reconstituted bodies came to life and stood on their feet as a vast army.

This vision was about the restoration of God's people, how God would bring them back from exile in Babylon.

But what made the difference in those dry bones?

It's interesting, I think, and significant, that in Hebrew one word (*ruach*) can mean wind, breath, or spirit. The same is true in Greek, where the word *pneuma* can mean wind, breath, or spirit.

Even when those bones had come together and were covered with tendons, flesh, and skin, they were still dead, until God's breath—the Spirit of God—breathed on them. *Then* they came to life!

The Spirit made all the difference! The Spirit brought them to life and empowered them to stand on their feet.

Ezekiel's vision was saying that God was promising to put his Spirit in his people!

It was the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. And in the days leading up to that particular Pentecost, a group of about 120 followers of Jesus had gathered to pray.

Jesus had been crucified about seven weeks earlier; but they knew something others didn't know—God had raised him from the dead, and they had actually seen him several times!

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

He had promised them that after his return to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit on them, and that he would always be present with them through the Spirit. And now that time had come . . .

The Day of Pentecost

It was a time of hustle and bustle in Jerusalem that day nearly 2,000 years ago. It was the busiest time of the year there, with pilgrims from virtually all over the known world having come there to celebrate. The Day of Pentecost had come!

Now traditionally, Pentecost was known to the Jews as the “Feast of Weeks.” The Old Testament Law prescribed three major Jewish festivals that were to be held each year. Pentecost was the best attended of the three. Since it took place in the late spring, it was the best time of the year to travel, especially by sea.

Pentecost was a joyous celebration of the barley wheat harvest. It recognized that the harvest was a gift from God. Seven weeks earlier during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with Passover, a priest had stood before the altar in the temple’s Holy Place with a fistful of barley wheat, waving it before God as an offering to him. This sheaf of barley wheat represented the first fruits of the harvest, and was offered to God *before* the harvest began. Then fifty days later, after ample time for the harvest, came the Feast of Weeks—“Pentecost” (from the Greek for “fifty”). It was a time to praise God for his gracious provision for his people.

The feasts were always joyous, festive celebrations, all of them, because they celebrated God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people. Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Lights (Hanukkah)—all these festivals were times of deep yearnings and stirred expectations about the coming of the Messiah, God’s anointed one. Many of the Jews thought the Messiah, the Son of David, would break the yoke of Roman rule and restore Israel to the former glories of David’s kingdom. So they were yearning for his coming and eagerly waiting for his appearing!

This Pentecost was the first Pentecost after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. And on that special day with so many pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world, God did something new and amazing, something he had promised through the prophet Joel. God poured out his Holy Spirit on the church, his waiting people. And things have never been the same since!

You see, just as with Ezekiel and those dry bones, *the outpouring of the Holy Spirit made a radical difference in the church’s witness and life together.*

Today is Pentecost Sunday, when we remember this outpouring of God’s Spirit on his church. Listen to the story of what happened that day from Acts 2:1-21 . . .

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and

Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious
day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter went on to preach the good news about Jesus Christ, how though he had been crucified by the Romans through the plot of some of the Jewish leaders, God had raised him from the dead. All this was according to God’s determined purpose and foreknowledge, to bring about salvation for everyone who would call on the name of the Lord, just as the Scriptures said. Peter ended by declaring that God had made Jesus, whom they had crucified, both Lord and Messiah (2:22-36).

Many of those who heard “were cut to the heart” and asked what they should do (2:37). Peter told them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). He warned them with many other words, pleading with them to accept Jesus as God’s Messiah. And about 3,000 of them did and were baptized that day!

When we remember what happened that day, it reminds us of this all-important truth: *The Holy Spirit makes all the difference in a church when it yields to his purpose and power.*

But just what difference does he make? What kind of impact does the presence of the Spirit have on the Lord’s church when it yields to him?

The church’s witness

From what we see in this text, it’s clear, isn’t it, that *the Spirit makes a difference in the church’s witness*. But how?

Well, for one thing, the Spirit *empowers the church for witness* (2:1-12). From the time of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection about seven weeks before this Pentecost, Jesus’ followers had not spoken openly about him and what had happened. Just as Jesus had told them, they were

waiting for the promise of the Father, the baptism of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5). Now the Spirit had been poured out on them, immersing the church in his power, and they were boldly proclaiming Jesus as both Lord and Messiah! Just as Jesus was empowered for his earthly ministry when the Spirit descended on him as he was praying at his baptism (Luke 3:21-23a), so the church was empowered for its witness with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. They boldly proclaimed the gospel to those who were gathered there.

In the same way, when we yield to him today, the Spirit still empowers the church for witness!

Their witness was grounded in both their experience with Jesus and what they now understood the Old Testament Scriptures to be saying about him. In other words, *the Spirit enlightened their understanding* (2:13-36), so that they were able to show from Scripture that this was God's plan all along—a very important point to make with these devout Jews to whom they were speaking.

That in turn *emboldened their proclamation* (2:22-39), so that they readily declared who Jesus is and what God was doing in him to bring salvation.

When the Spirit empowers our witness and enlightens our understanding, we will likewise become bold in our proclamation. I'm not talking about becoming arrogant or confrontational, but about being ready and willing to tell who Jesus is and what God is doing in him, seeking to warn people of the spiritual danger they face and to persuade them to find salvation in him. After all, if you saw a blind man about to walk off a cliff, wouldn't you warn him?

As the Spirit makes a difference in our witness as a church, he eventually *enlarges the fellowship* (2:40-41), just as he did with the church in Jerusalem in those early days of its existence. History shows us that in seasons of spiritual renewal and revival and awakening, God adds more to the church in a few short years than he does in a generation or more in other times.

The church's life together

But it's not just the church's witness where the Spirit makes a difference. *He also makes a difference in the church's life together* (2:42-47).

In vv. 42-47, Luke gives us a summary of the state of the church at this point . . .

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Indeed, the Spirit was making a difference in the church in Jerusalem, as he developed in the members a deep devotion to *learning* the apostles' teaching about Jesus and what it means to follow him, to the *fellowship* (what they shared in common in Christ), to their *worship* of God (especially in Holy Communion, "the breaking of bread"), and to the life of *prayer*. Likewise, they were committed to worshiping together regularly and to *incorporating and assimilating* those the Lord was adding to their community of faith. And out of that life of devotion and their fellowship in Christ there grew this incredible sense of *generosity* in which they cared for each other's material needs.

I can't help but wonder what a "State of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church" speech would sound like today. Could the same things be said about us that Luke said here in Acts 2 about the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost?

It was the presence and the activity of the Holy Spirit that made the difference. As the church yielded to the Spirit, through whom the Father and the risen Lord Jesus were now present with and in them, he created and nurtured these commitments and disciplines in the church and its members. No, they weren't perfect—that would soon become clear. But God was working among them and through them in a mighty way, and that was having a powerful impact on the world around them! And the same can happen today, *if* we as individual disciples and as a congregation yield ourselves completely to the empowering presence of God's Holy Spirit!

Don't we need that in our church and in our lives today?

We can have it! Just as with Ezekiel's dry bones and with the church at Pentecost and today, *the Holy Spirit makes all the difference when we yield to his purpose and power.* The question is, *Will we?* Will you?

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