

Sunday December 3, 2023
Lesson 1: Filled With the Holy Spirit
Scripture: Luke 1: 5-23

Context:

Today we start our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The first unit is titled “Transforming Spirit,” with lessons on the gospel of Luke in the story of Jesus’ birth tying into the season of Advent. The focus of today’s lesson will be to determine ways God fills us with the Holy Spirit.

Of all the gospels, Luke is perhaps the most detailed when it comes to the narrative of Christ’s birth. Not only does the gospel tell of the birth as it also dives into the stories of the relatives of Jesus, and particularly his cousin John the Baptist. Today we examine the story of Jesus’ uncle, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

Setting the context during the reign of King Herod, the author gives the reader a snapshot of the powers of the world. Underneath the King of Judea comes several different groups including the priestly line. We are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth, those who come from the line of Moses’ brother Aaron.¹ The Aaronic priests had been divided into 24 divisions named for Aaron’s 24 sons (1 Chronicles 24:1-19), and were required to take turns serving at the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem.² Even though the text tells us of the couple living in the hill country, there would have been places on the Temple grounds for the traveling priests to come and stay to fulfill their duty.

The couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, represent the model priestly family. They are the picture of a pious Jewish couple minus the usual children in their household. Elizabeth is much like other older women in the text who are unable to conceive: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the unnamed wife of Manoah (Samson’s mother), and Hannah.³ There is no description of how they feel in regard to the barrenness as they continue to serve the Lord and go about their daily lives.

Everything changes in their life when Zechariah goes to the Temple in Jerusalem and is observing the burning of incense on the altar within the Holy Place. As he is alone with the people waiting outside for his blessing, the angel Gabriel comes to visit him. Gabriel is one of the seven archangels of late Judaism and is usually given messenger duty.⁴ His message to Zechariah is fourfold: Elizabeth will have a child to be named John; the child will give joy to Elizabeth and Zechariah; the child will be reared in the Nazirite tradition; and the child will minister in the spirit of Elijah and will herald the “end time.”⁵ This will change everything for

¹ Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 25.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 26

Zechariah's world.

As one would expect in older age, Zechariah has doubts and for his unbelief, he is made speechless until the day these things will happen. He goes outside to explain to the people, and they realize he has seen a vision and cannot speak. He returns home where the next chapter begins to unfold. God is once again at work in patterns familiar from the Old Testament: the casting of lots (Zechariah going to the Temple), a vision in the Temple, a heavenly messenger, a promise, a sign, and a childless old couple.⁶ God will work from within the institutions, rituals, and practices of Judaism for the story to take place.⁷ The Spirit will be at work to take old and new to bring forth life.

Application

Are you full? As we assemble back into the workplace after being at our Thanksgiving tables, we can think of how we were hopefully filled with good food, great memories, and thanksgiving for the life we've been given. The idea of being filled is a positive connotation as we pray it gives us energy and sustenance.

Yet our text today gives us another definition and understanding of the word "full" or "filled up." Zechariah is approached by the angel Gabriel to be told of how the child born to him and Elizabeth would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. Being full of the Holy Spirit will allow him to go on to be like the prophets before him such as Elijah as he leads people back to the Lord and they will prepare for the coming of the Messiah. No wonder Zechariah had questions for the angel!

The Holy Spirit of the Triune God is perhaps the least discussed or preached/taught on in some Christian circles because there is so much mystery to come with this person of the Trinity. It is often easier to look to Jesus as the text has him interacting with people, or the Father as there are the accounts of creation and Jesus' conversations naming the Father. And yet for Christianity, the Holy Spirit leads in the changing of lives and the moving of the church and all creation. The Holy Spirit is just as important as the other persons of the Trinity, even if there is such mystery to understanding how the Holy Spirit moves and works.

What is wonderful about this narrative is we are provided with a snapshot of how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of people in ways which are life-giving and full of good will. As we will discover through the series and Advent, John the Baptist both prepares the people with words and actions of the transformed life to come with the Messiah. The Holy Spirit was at work even before John was born though, reminding us of the grace of God which is always at work before we know what is taking place.⁸ We are directed to see how the Holy Spirit leads and works with goodness in our lives.

So, what are examples of how the Holy Spirit fills us? It's a wonderful question and one which I think Christians are invited to reflect on daily. In the case of John the Baptist, we will see him leaning into his calling, preaching to people, and telling them about the Lord. We will hear him both encourage and chastise. We will see him interacting with his cousin Jesus and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United Methodist Christians recognize this as prevenient grace, the grace of God which goes before us.

celebrating his baptism in the Jordan river.

I think this points to us to how the Holy Spirit will move in our life in different ways. Sometimes it will be simply in daily living, perhaps where we do things in our jobs or vocations where we feel absolute joy and delight, seeing our spiritual gifts used in the world. Other times, the Holy Spirit will lead us to perhaps check in with a friend, encouraging them in a season. Yet at times, the Holy Spirit may lead us to speak up, particularly when we see harm being done or we feel systems are not being just. Other times, the Holy Spirit may lead us to hold our tongue, so we do not participate in hatred or division. And other times the Holy Spirit will move us to worship the Lord in different ways, delighting in praising our God who loves us so much.

Like our text, that's just a snapshot of what the Holy Spirit can and will do in our lives. Just as we discover in the season of Advent, the Holy Spirit moves from person to person revealing different things God has called them to do. The beauty of how the Holy Spirit works is how one person's story will be different from the next in discussing what God has revealed. Yet one thing you can trust is the Holy Spirit will be at work with everyone, tugging at hearts and minds to tell God's story with our lives. Whether we are a five-year-old trying to figure out who God is, or we are a seventy-five-year-old man who has been told he will be a father, God will constantly surprise us keeping us on our toes and filling us with the Holy Spirit.

What have you been taught or heard of the Holy Spirit growing up? How can you distinguish between the Holy Spirit and your own will? Where have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your life? What is the tie between grace and the Holy Spirit? How have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of others around you?

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