

Sermon – October 22, 2023
“Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 10:34-48

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people and through them ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! I would like to thank all who have taken time to consider accepting positions in church leadership for the coming year. Please pray over the opportunities that are before you and let Holy Spirit lead us as we make decisions about how to be part of the work of our local church in the coming year. Saying “no” to such a request after a time of prayer and discernment is a good answer as it lets those tasked with identifying people to match with the open leadership positions of the church know they need to continue to listen for Holy Spirit's guidance for our church's leadership. For those who have already agreed to be part of the leadership, we give thanks. For those still in prayer, know we pray with you and for those whose hearts are stirred to serve in a new way. Let the current leadership know what is on your heart.

I would like to back up into chapter nine of Acts to verse 31. “Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”¹ With Saul’s transformation from persecutor to witness for Jesus, the Church has peace and enters into a time of growth. Notice the Church is only active in Judea and Samaria. There are still the ends of the earth to engage with the Good News.

As we move into Chapter 10 of Acts, we encounter the first of two visions sent from God to people He has chosen as His instruments. The first is sent to a centurion named Cornelius living and serving Rome in Caesarea. Caesarea is a port city on the Mediterranean built by Herod and named for Caesar. The naming of the port shows a strong tie between Herod and Rome. Caesarea is also a place where there was great conflict between the Romans and the Jews. There was a large Jewish population in this city, and they followed the Jewish food laws. In following them, they would not enter a Gentile house for a meal, and that lack of a common experience led to much misunderstanding and conflict between the Gentiles and Jews.

Cornelius was in charge of about 100 Roman soldiers. He was a God-fearer, one who was drawn to the Jewish concept of one God and the Jewish religion, but who, like many Gentiles interested in the Jewish religion, would not be circumcised and become a proselyte. But notice from today’s reading that Cornelius is praying at three in the afternoon, the hour of prayer. And in that time of prayer, he receives instruction from an angel in a vision. In the vision he is told to send to Joppa for Peter who is lodging with a tanner by the sea. Don’t miss in the scripture that God speaks to Cornelius when he is in prayer to God. God hears his prayer and has accepted his gifts for the poor and now is communicating with him in a vision. If we want to hear from God, if we want to have communications with the creator of the universe, then we need to learn to listen when we pray. Don’t let our prayer be only prayers of petition, our shopping list of what we desire, but let our prayers also include times of listening for God’s reply, of being silent before God. When Cornelius receives God’s instruction, he acts. He has heard from God and obeys, sending men to Joppa to get Peter.

Now let’s move to the second vision we need to be aware of as background. We move north to a port called Joppa. This is a place the story of God’s people has been before. We might recall that Jonah, as he fled from God’s command to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, got on board a ship at Joppa and was headed as far from Nineveh as he could get. About noon on the

day after Cornelius received his vision, when the men he sent to get Peter were close to the gate of the house, Peter also receives a vision. I will point out that when we find two people receiving a vision from God, we should realize that God is doing something important, and we want to pay attention. Peter's vision is more familiar to us; it is a sheet full of clean and unclean animals let down from heaven and Peter is told to "kill and eat." Peter's initial reply is "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."ⁱⁱⁱ Peter has kept the food laws, laws that the Jews held so strongly they would rather die than eat an unclean animal. God gives Peter instructions in the vision, telling him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."ⁱⁱⁱ The Jews had developed their response to the food laws to the point that they refused to eat in the house of a Gentile for fear there might be a forbidden food like pork present and they would break the laws and become unclean. Their approach to the food laws was a source of much of the conflict between Jews and Gentiles as the Jews would not fellowship with Gentiles, and that led to separation, mistrust, misunderstanding, and anger. After the vision, Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with the men now at the gate to the house he is in, those sent by Cornelius. Peter seems to understand God's instruction about clean and unclean not being just about food but also applying to people and invites the men in for a meal and lodging, hospitality. The next day he goes with them, and they return to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius who has gathered all of his family and friends together to hear Peter. Peter is welcomed by Cornelius, who does try to worship Peter as a deity, but Peter will not allow that, stressing that he is only a mortal. Cornelius shares with Peter the vision he had received and Peter seems to understand from his own vision that not only was God speaking about food but "that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"^{iv} Peter seems to be growing in his understanding that God is accepting the Gentiles who have their hearts turned to him. Peter, in response to Cornelius' request, begins to share the message of Jesus, the Good News, with those gathered. Let me point out that if you are looking for a concise statement of what the disciples preached about Jesus, the summary Luke includes in verses 34 – 43 is a very concise statement of the Gospel. I encourage us to not only mark this passage in our Bibles but to study it until we are able to follow this simple concise version of what God has done for those who believe through Jesus Christ. As we also seek to be witnesses for Jesus, the one job we have for Jesus, we need to be prepared to share the Gospel, and Peter's version found here in Acts is a great place to begin our preparations. Look with me this morning at what Peter does.

He begins with the appearance of John the Baptist and his baptism for repentance and then shares with those gathered the essentials about Jesus. Peter shares that Jesus was filled with Holy Spirit and power and that Peter and the other apostles were witnesses to all that Jesus did in Judea and Jerusalem, how he healed those who were oppressed by the devil. Peter tells those listening how Jesus was put to death on a tree, but God raised him from the dead and allowed Jesus to appear to many witnesses who ate and drank with him, and Jesus commanded those who followed him to preach to the people and testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. And that all the prophets, whom those listening to Peter as God-fearers might know about, testified that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. As Peter shares that all who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness of sins through his name, Holy Spirit falls on those who hear Peter speak. Those gathered receive Holy Spirit as the disciples did at Pentecost. These Gentiles who have now heard the Good News and believed have been given a manifestation of Holy Spirit like the manifestation that Jesus' Jewish disciples received at Pentecost. Notice in verse 45, Luke shares that those with Peter were astounded that the gift of Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Those with Peter did not expect Gentiles to be able to receive Holy Spirit. Peter does not seem to be shocked. Peter has been processing the instructions in the vision from God he received and understands that what God makes clean through Jesus, we are not to call unclean. The outpouring of Holy Spirit in Caesarea is the Pentecost of the Gentiles. Far from the temple in Jerusalem, in a city dominated by Gentiles, Holy Spirit is poured out on those who believe. There is no laying on of hands by an apostle that brings the gift of Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is not poured out after baptism. Belief comes to those listening to Peter's sharing of the Gospel, and the gift of Holy Spirit is given even to the Gentiles. They are now clean and Peter commands that they be baptized in the name of Jesus. There is not circumcision before God confirms these Gentiles with the gift of Holy Spirit as part of the Church. They enter into the covenant of God not as Jews, but as Gentile Christ-followers. And don't miss that Peter is invited to stay several days with these new believers. They have received Holy Spirit power and are now empowered to be Jesus' witnesses, but they need instruction about their new belief in Jesus and what that means. Peter stays with them to begin that process. Immediately we should notice that God is able to make the unclean clean. God, through Jesus' blood shed on a cross, can make even the foulest sinner clean. What the Roman idea of peace through power could not do, reconcile Gentiles and Jews into one people, is

accomplished in Jesus Christ. As Jews and Gentiles come to faith in Jesus, they are reconciled and join in table fellowship with one another and the everlasting fellowship of Jesus Christ.

We should ask ourselves, “What does the outpouring of Holy Spirit on Gentiles mean for us today?” First, let me point out that we are Gentiles who are followers of Jesus. We also have had Holy Spirit poured out on us, which we believe occurred at our baptism and many times again since then as we have been given the gift of fresh wind and fresh fire from God and will be given that gift again as long as we continue to open our hearts to receive this gift from Jesus and ask the Father to give to us Holy Spirit.

Next, it means that now Gentiles are equipped to spread the Gospel, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ where they are and out to the end of the earth. They have received power from on high and are to be witnesses for Jesus. The movement of God to reconcile all people has moved beyond Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and now is out to the end of the earth and poised to head out from Caesarea to the rest of the world. Gentiles, those who are not of the Jewish race, can now be part of the new covenant with God, and God has confirmed this by the pouring out of Holy Spirit on Gentile believers. We who have heard the word of God, the Gospel, and have believed, also can be washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross and receive Holy Spirit. Those who believe in Jesus are accepted by faith alone; no outward sign of circumcision or baptism is required. The movement of the Gospel and the breaking in of the kingdom of God has headed out of Jerusalem. passing through Judea and all of Samaria. and now is headed out to the end of the earth through Gentiles. We don't know all the names of the witnesses for Jesus across the ages who have come to faith and then become witnesses for Jesus in this ongoing spreading of the Gospel to the end of the earth. At some point though, through faithful witnesses in our lives, we came to faith and received Holy Spirit power that we might take up our cross and follow Jesus, becoming his witnesses right here, right now for as long as it is called today, for as long as we have breath in our lungs.

What is our response to this great news? We who have faith in Jesus are to be his witnesses in this place. We need to get ready; we have Holy Spirit residing in us, but we need to get ourselves prepared to be faithful witnesses for Jesus. We need to be taught, we need to learn by spending time in the Word and to let Holy Spirit lead us into all truth. We are to learn to listen for Jesus speaking to us through the word of God. We, like Corneilius, are to spend time in prayer with Jesus on a regular basis and listen for him to speak into our lives. We are to be those

who are giving alms to help those in need around us and in our lives. We are to be those seeking, as we are able, to provide direct help to those in need, giving our time and labor as a response to our salvation, the gift of God we have received, and all we do is to be done for God's glory.

We need to get ourselves ready to be witnesses for Jesus. We need to have on our tongues or at our fingertips the Gospel message so we can share the Good News with anyone Holy Spirit has told us we are to go to. We also need to be ready to share our own testimony of what Jesus Christ has done for us, how our lives have been transformed from what they once were in the world to what they are now in Jesus Christ. Our testimony speaks to the truth of the Gospel in our lives. It is part of our witness to the love of Jesus. We need to be ready to share the source of the hope within us when we are sent to someone to tell them how Jesus has transformed us. Our lives speak to the power of the Gospel, Jesus' love acting in us.

Let me close this morning by taking us back to verse 20 where the men sent by Cornelius have come to the gate of the house in Joppa, and Peter, following Holy Spirit's prompting, meets them at the gate and tells them, "I am the one you are looking for." Peter's response to these men's seeking him is to be our response whenever and wherever Holy Spirit leads us. We are to open our hearts and submit to being the one that those seeking Jesus Christ are looking for. We are to be ready, open, and willing to respond with the Good News of Jesus Christ. So let us endeavor to get ready, learn the Good News, and be ready with our own testimony of Jesus' transforming power in our lives. Be often in prayer to God and listening for His reply. And finally, ask Jesus to give us willing hearts to be his witnesses in all the places he leads us, to all those we are directed and through all the means he provides. I pray for the day when there is no time for a sermon during worship because so many have a testimony to share about how they have been Jesus' witness during the past week and through our witness to Jesus the kingdom of God is growing right here right now.

Pray with me. Jesus, prepare us to be the ones those of the world are looking for. Help us to get ready that we might be faithful witnesses to your transforming love in our lives right here, right now. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ Act 9:31 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3280). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Acts 10:14 Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 10:15 Ibid.

^{iv} Acts 10:35 Ibid.