

Receiving the Spirit  
Luke 3:15–17, 21–22; Acts 8:14–17, 19:1–7  
Sunday, January 12, 2025 (Baptism of the Lord)

So almost three weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus on Christmas. Following along with the story, eight days after he was born, he was circumcised and officially given the name of Jesus. Around 40 days after he was born, his parents brought him to the Temple to make the appropriate offerings and have him dedicated to God. Last week we heard the story of the wise men coming and bringing their gifts, and it is thought that that happened when Jesus was around two years old. Luke's gospel tells the story of Mary and Joseph accidentally leaving Jesus in the Temple when he was 12 years old.

And now this week, he's thirty years old and getting baptized. There's a bit of a *gap* in there. We know very little about Jesus *before* the age of 12, and we hear absolutely *nothing* about Jesus' life from 12 until 30. And the first thing that we hear about him in the gospels when he is 30 is the story of his baptism. It's almost like nothing about his life really matters before he was baptized. What matters is what happened *after* he was baptized.

Now, I *would* make the analogy that nothing about *our* lives matters before we were baptized. Like Paul writes, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life is gone, and a new life has begun." That what matters about our lives is what happens *after* we are baptized. *But* how many of you (show of hands) were baptized when you were infants? Most of us cannot remember what life was like *before* you were baptized.

I can. I have told you many times before that I was baptized when I was 14, and how I expected something to instantly feel different when the water touched my head, but nothing actually felt different. I felt exactly the same as I did *before* I was baptized. And my life pretty much looked the same as it did before I was baptized. It wasn't until three years later that I had this experience of the presence and love

of God that marked the beginning of a new life for me. From *that* point on, my life started to look very different than it did before.

Some of you may have had similar experiences. You were baptized as a baby or even as a teenager, but it wasn't until years later that something happened, something *changed*, you had some experience of God, and you came to a new place of faith. Or maybe you were baptized when you were younger and *nothing* happened, nothing ever changed, you never had that experience of the presence and love of God and came to a new place of faith. And there is nothing *wrong* with you if that's the case, because we are all on our own timeline. We are each going at our own pace on this journey together. And God works in different ways in each of our lives.

But what I want to tell you today, the good news is that you *can*. It is *never* too late for that new life to begin. It is never too late to experience the presence and love of God and come to a new place of faith. Some people refer to that as being born again. Some people refer to it as a spiritual awakening. The way I want to refer to it today is *receiving the Holy Spirit*. I think *that* is what happens when we start living that new life and come to a new place of faith; we receive the Holy Spirit. And it is never too late for you to receive the Holy Spirit into your life. It is *always* possible, for *everyone*. So what I want to do today is talk about what that *means*. What does it mean to receive the Holy Spirit? What does that *look like*?

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A lot of Christians say that receiving the Holy Spirit means that we start speaking in tongues. Like when Jesus' disciples received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and they all began speaking in different languages as the Spirit gave them the ability. Or like in our second story from Acts, when Paul baptizes this group of people and lays his hands on them, and when he does, the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they begin speaking in tongues. A lot of people say *that* is what it looks like to receive the Holy Spirit.

*But* that is not what it says happens in the *first* story we read from Acts. There are *other* stories in scripture where the Holy Spirit comes upon people, and they do not start speaking in tongues. And as far as we know, *Jesus* never spoke in tongues when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in *his* baptism. Speaking of which, if Jesus received the Holy Spirit in his baptism, does that mean that Jesus *did not* have the Holy Spirit *before* that? If Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, then wouldn't the Holy Spirit already have been with Jesus?

One of the problems with this understanding of what it means to receive the Holy Spirit is that it views the Holy Spirit as something that we *do not have*, and we *need to get*. That receiving the Holy Spirit means we get something that we did not have before. But the Holy Spirit is not a *thing* that we need to *get*. The Holy Spirit is a *person* with whom we are in *relationship*. The Holy Spirit is the person of God, the *presence* of God with us in the world today. And the Holy Spirit is a person that is already with you.

When scripture talks about the Holy Spirit, it uses two words. In the Old Testament, it's the Hebrew word *ruach*, which means *spirit*, but it also means *breath* or *wind*. Same thing in the New Testament. It's the Greek word *pneuma*, which means *spirit*, *breath*, or *wind*. The *spirit* of God is the *breath* of God, the very *essence* of God, the *life force* of God. Genesis says that before the world was even created, there was just this swirling, chaotic mass of water, and the Spirit of God moved over the water. So the Spirit has always been here. Then when the first human beings were created, it says that God *breathed* God's *ruach*, God's breath, God's *spirit* into them. So God's Spirit has always been *in* us.

God's *spirit*, God's *essence*, the very life force and *presence* of God has always been *in* us and *around* us. It's not something we're *lacking*. It is an intrinsic part of us. We just don't always *know* it. It's like they said in that second story from Acts, "We didn't even know there *was* a Holy Spirit." Receiving the Holy Spirit is not *getting* something that we *lack*. It is *waking up* to this *reality* of which we were not *aware*.

The reality that the Spirit of God is *with* you and *in* you. Some of you might have already come to an awareness of that and been *transformed* by that awareness. Some of you might *not* have yet. But that does not change the fact that God's Spirit is *with* you and *in* you.

Part of the challenge is our understanding of what it means to *receive*. When you receive a *thing*, like a gift, someone gives you something that you did not have, and you take possession of it. But you can also *receive* a *person*. When you receive a visitor at your home, that just means that you *welcome* them. Think about a receiving line at a wedding or a funeral. What's happening there? The people who are hosting an event are *welcoming* the guests. Receiving the Holy Spirit means that we wake up to the reality that God is *with* us and *in* us, and we *welcome* God into our lives. We become aware that we are living life with God, that God has been with us all along, and we say, "God, you are *welcome* here."

Can you look back on your life and see the ways that God has been with you, guiding you? Things that have worked out that shouldn't have. How something *good* has come out of something *bad*. Times when you have found strength that you didn't know you had or the healing that you needed. Coincidences that seem way too coincidental. Could it be that God has been with you all along? Once we *see* that, once we become *aware* of God's presence with us and love for us, once we open our eyes and our hearts and our minds to the fact that we are living life *with* God, it changes everything.

Back in December I told you about the scene from the movie *Joe Versus the Volcano* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, where Meg Ryan's character says, "My father says that almost the whole world is asleep. Everybody you know. Everybody you see. Everybody you talk to. He says that only a few people are awake, and they live in a state of constant, total amazement." I think *that* is what life is like when we become aware of God's presence and love, and we receive the Holy Spirit and say, "God, you are *welcome* in my life." And I think we've all *seen* people like that. People who just seem to be *awake* to

the presence and love of God. People who we're like, "Wow, what's going on with *them*? How can *I* be like *that*?"

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About ten years ago, I was reading a book on freediving. It was about people who can hold their breath for three, five, ten minutes at a time and go *hundreds* of feet underwater. The author of this book was *amazed* by this and wanted to learn how to *do* it. So he went all over the world, talking to all these different people. And at one point, he's talking to this group of Japanese women who have been doing this for thousands of years. He asks them, "What's the secret? What do I have to do to be like you?" And they kind of laugh and say, "You just *dive*. You just get in the water." And he says, "It was the same answer the other divers had given me. There was no shortcut, no rulebook, no secret handshake, no specialized equipment or diet or pill that would get me there. The secret to going deep is within each of us. We're born with it."<sup>1</sup>

There's no *secret* to going deep with God. The Holy Spirit is within each of us. We're *born* with it. We already bear the Spirit of God. And when we become *aware* of that, it's like we start living a whole new life.

The author of that book talks about how, when you're diving, you work so hard to swim down those first 30 feet or so. It's a *struggle*. It's *hard work*. Your lungs are filled with air, and your body keeps wanting to float back up to the surface, so you really have to *work* to go deeper. But once you reach 30 feet, this amazing thing happens. Something *shifts*, and instead of pulling you back *up*, the ocean begins to pull you *deeper*. And it becomes almost effortless. Instead of paddling and pulling themselves deeper, the divers will just put their arms at their sides, relax, and let the ocean draw them in.

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<sup>1</sup> [James Nestor, \*Deep: Freediving, Renegade Science, and What the Ocean Tells Us About Ourselves\*.](#)

I think we can spend so much time and energy working and struggling to go *deeper* with God. “I’ve got to *pray* more. I’ve got to *read* more. I’ve got to do *whatever* more.” We look for the secrets, the shortcuts, the rulebooks. When all we really need to do is realize that the Spirit of God, the very *essence* and *presence* of God is *already* in us and around us. And when we reach that point, when we come to that awareness, it’s like God just starts to draw us in.

I told you earlier how it wasn’t until three years after I was baptized that my life really changed. I just kept living in the same way. And I made some pretty bad decisions. But there came a time when I was really struggling, going through a hard time, a lot of pain and fear and uncertainty. And it was *in* that time, I was reading scripture and praying one night, and I had the *overwhelming, undeniable* awareness that God was *with me*. I had what I can only describe as an experience of the very presence of God. I *knew* that God was *with* me, *in* me, *around* me, and I was going to be okay. God started drawing me in, and *that* was when everything changed.

That was when I received the Holy Spirit and really *welcomed* God into my life. My baptism marked the beginning of a new life in Christ. But it wasn’t until I came to that awareness that God’s Spirit was in me that my life actually *changed*.

*Every single one* of us *can* experience that. I can’t give you step-by-step directions or tell you the secret to it. It’s going to look different in your life than it looked in mine or someone else’s. All I can tell you is that it’s possible. Because God is *with* you and God *loves* you and God’s Spirit is *in* you. You are God’s beloved child. Hear that good news. Believe it. Trust it. Open your heart and mind and life to it. *Receive it*. Welcome the God who has been with you all along, and it will lead you to a whole new life, in Christ. Amen.