

**WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?
WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT DO?
HOW DO I RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT?**

Who is the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do? How do I receive the Holy Spirit? Three essential questions on this day of Pentecost when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit come down to set Christ's Church on fire. The first question: *Who is the Holy Spirit?* The Holy Spirit is God. But it is also the way of describing God's invisibility. The Holy Spirit is God's unseen presence, God's unseen power, God's hidden working, God's hidden life on earth, **in us**.

There are 2000 years of Christian experience of the Holy Spirit and many learned volumes written about the subject. Between the Old and the New Testament there are over a thousand scriptural references to God's Spirit. That's more than we can take in this morning. In thinking about those three questions today I suggest that we look quite simply at the scripture lessons we have just read to see what they tell us about the Holy Spirit.

The first Scripture lesson to look at is from the Old Testament, Psalm 104.
You hide your face, and they are terrified; you take away their breath, and they die and return to their dust. You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth.

The first thing we should know is that in Hebrew and in Greek the word for "*Spirit*" is the same as the word for "*breath*" and "*wind*." So the words of the Psalm could also read: *you take away their **spirit** and they die.... You send forth your **breath** and they are created....* These words let us know that the breath, the life that is in each of God's creatures, comes from God. God's Spirit at its very basic core is God's gift of life to all creation. And God's Spirit is the force of life.

We see God's Spirit as breath again in Jesus' resurrection appearance on Easter evening. Jesus appears in the locked upper room with the disciples. He shares the Peace of the Lord with them and then he *breathes* on them and tells them *receive the Holy Spirit*. So God's Spirit is breathed not only on all creation, but especially by Jesus, God's Son, on his disciples, his followers. Jesus' breath is equated with God's Holy Spirit. And what does the Holy Spirit empower them to do? Jesus gives them the power to forgive sins or retain them. So Jesus' followers – the Church – is given the power to hold people forgiven or to hold them guilty. That is a big responsibility. But let me ask you this: *when did Jesus ever encourage anyone not to forgive?* He taught us in the Lord's Prayer that we should ask, "*forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*" Peter asked Jesus, "*How often should I forgive my brother if he sins against me,*" and feeling very virtuous he asked, "*as many as seven times?*" "*Not 7 times,*" Jesus tells him "*but 70!*" The true power and work of the Holy Spirit is not the power to hold people guilty, but rather the power to forgive.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians we learn that each person has unique and special gifts given by the Holy Spirit. One can heal, another can preach, another is given wisdom, yet another can understand different languages, and so forth. Each one is given a unique and special gift from God. The Spirit works in each person differently, calling forth unique gifts and abilities. But what else does Paul say about the Spirit? Seven times Paul refers to the Spirit as *One* or *the Same*. The *One* and the *Same Spirit* gives each person a unique and special gift so that all those gifts together will bless and unify the One Church – the One Body – of Christ. Although there are a great diversity of gifts they are all given by *One Spirit* for the common good. The other thing that Paul tells us is that we were all baptized into the *Same Spirit*. In our baptisms we each received the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles on Pentecost the Spirit of God sets Jesus' followers on fire! The Holy Spirit is a powerful force. It fills the room and overpowers the disciples. It is as if each person were aflame. The Holy Spirit possesses each one of Jesus' followers who go forth telling of God's mighty works, speaking in different languages as the Spirit gives them miraculous speech. And likewise the Spirit gives miraculous understanding to the diverse crowd from every race and nation as each person hears the disciples tell of God's mighty acts in his or her own language.

There are several important things we see the Holy Spirit doing on Pentecost. Again, as in 1 Corinthians 12, the Spirit is uniting, telling one wonderful story through many diverse cultures and languages. The Spirit of God is a powerful and miraculous force to be reckoned with. The Spirit, for a short time at least, literally fills Jesus' believers, using them in miraculous and exciting ways. But it's also important to note how that Spirit happens to come upon that particular bunch of Jesus' followers? They are gathered together in prayer. And they have been praying and waiting with expectancy for a long time. It was only then that the Spirit came upon them.

That's who the Holy Spirit is and a significant part of the story of what the Holy Spirit does. But, how do we receive the Holy Spirit? The first answer to that question is that you already have! Everyone who has life, breathes in the gift of God's Spirit, God's life. And that is a wonderful gift to be appreciated and to give God thanks for each and every day! Everyone who is baptized has also received a gift of the Holy Spirit. [We will all be blessed to witness the gift of the Holy Spirit given to six new Christians this morning through Holy Baptism.] "*You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*" I will say to each of the newly baptized as I make the sign of the cross upon their foreheads. God's Spirit, God's life is given to each of us. We already have the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore the Holy Spirit is at work in us giving us unique and special gifts and abilities to share with the larger community. Part of what each of us needs to discover and discern is the unique and special gift the Holy Spirit is giving you to share with the Church. The Church needs your special gift and ability in order to be whole. And when we use our gift, indeed the Holy Spirit is working in us for the good of the Church.

Yet another way we receive the Holy Spirit, is every time in Jesus' name we receive the blessing of forgiveness of our sins. We also receive the Holy Spirit when we are empowered to forgive others. For Jesus breathed on his followers the Spirit's power to forgive sins.

Last of all God offers the amazing gift of filling us with his Holy Spirit and powerfully, even miraculously, using us for his glory. In order to be filled with the Holy Spirit we can pray, and ask God for that amazing gift, and wait on God's good timing.

So on this Pentecost celebration let us pray that the Spirit's power will set us as his Church gathered today ablaze with his power. May we give thanks for the Spirit's life in us. May we show forth the Spirit's unity through our many unique gifts. May we show forth the Spirit's love in the power to forgive. And may the Spirit's power be manifest in us as we open ourselves more and more to God and faithfully ask for his power to be manifest in each of our lives. *Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*