

May 17 Lesson 12

How Do You Receive the Holy Spirit?

Focal Passage: Acts 1:1-11

Background Text: Acts 1:1-26

Purpose Statement: To prepare ourselves for receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit through focusing on the fundamentals of our faith.

Acts 1:1-11

1Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, 2right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven. Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. 3After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom.4While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: 5John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

6As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?"

7Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority.

8Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

9After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. 11They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven."

Key Verse: "Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

A church in a small town had taken a bold step. They had built a family life center and opened it to the community. This was to help fulfill their mission statement: "To introduce people to Jesus who don't know Jesus." It served to advertise their worship and programs. Members also used it as an opportunity to share what Jesus and the church meant to them.

One night, though, three robbers tried to gain access through a side door. When the unarmed night watchman stumbled upon them, they shot at him. Luckily, he was unharmed.

This rattled the congregation, since there were many people in the building at that time. Even though the church enhanced security, fears lingered. Some advocated restricting the facility to members only.

Leaders wrestled with tough questions. “We don’t want to lose our mission. What can we do?” “How can we become a sanctuary for troubled souls without becoming a fortress?” “Don’t the people in those drug houses nearby need to hear the gospel?” This led to discussing broader issues. How do we proclaim the gospel in a sometimes-dangerous world? Should we take care of our needs first?

As we study Acts in this unit, we will see that the early Christians wrestled with these concerns as well. Today’s passage depicts the pre-Pentecost period of the church. What they said and did would resonate with churches throughout the centuries that tried to stay true to their mission during turbulent times.

The Book of New Beginnings

Acts has been attributed to Luke, the writer of the Gospel bearing his name. The author made a direct link to it in the first verse. He had documented “everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning.” He was setting the stage for what was coming next: the birth of the church and the proclaiming of the gospel throughout the world.

It was important for Luke to emphasize this transition. Perhaps that is why he focused on Jesus’ ascension. Matthew and John did not include it, and Mark referred to it only briefly in the expanded ending to his Gospel (Mark 16:19). Luke, though, mentioned it twice, in today’s passage and in Luke 24:50-53. He noted that when Jesus was taken up, “a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). The next time they would see him would be when he descends from heaven, in the future.

It’s easy to imagine their bewilderment. Luke specified that the resurrected Jesus had stayed on earth forty days (verse 3). His many appearances during that time gave “convincing proofs.” Perhaps his followers assumed he would always be with them in this manner. Parting from him, consequently, would be difficult. It would also be puzzling. Jesus cryptically told them that soon they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (verse 5). They did not know what that meant, nor how it would happen.

So these believers were caught between Jesus ascending and the Holy Spirit descending. What they experienced and how they lived out their faith during this in-between time helps us prepare ourselves to receive the Spirit today.

How are transitions both a challenge as well as an opportunity for faith? How have you seen this in your life and in the life of your church?

Preparing for the Spirit: Stay Open

The resurrected Jesus used the time prior to his ascension as a period of final instruction. When he taught about their baptism by the Holy Spirit, they jumped to a conclusion. They assumed he was talking about quickly restoring the kingdom to Israel (verse 6). This referred to liberating the nation from Roman rule.

Their question reveals an underlying desire to interpret faith in terms of their own wishes. Overthrowing Roman occupation was a national obsession (see Acts 5:36-37), and it no doubt excited them to think that the promised Spirit would inaugurate this. Perhaps they shared a sense of pride as well. Since they had been chosen by the Messiah, they would be instrumental in the formation of this new Israel.

Jesus' response, in verses 7-8, offered a needed corrective. Their place wasn't to "know," to be in control. They weren't to initiate anything. Instead, their place was to receive power from the Holy Spirit. They were called to be witnesses to Jesus, and the Spirit would give them the needed knowledge and direction.

This would make their witness truly an adventure. The future was wide open, and the Holy Spirit would lead the way. As the rest of Acts makes clear, the early believers would meet new people, go to new places, witness new miracles, start new ministries, and gain new understandings. None of this would have been possible if they had closed themselves off to the Spirit by clinging to old ways and seeking security.

The adventure the early believers were about to embark upon would be so astonishing that they had no way to predict or direct it. Being open to this journey would be vital to their faith community, as it is to ours as well.

What encourages a sense of openness to the Holy Spirit? What hinders it? When have you felt led by the Spirit into a new ministry?

Preparing for the Spirit: Stay Focused

Angels play a significant role in both Luke and Acts. Toward the end of the Gospel, two angels "in gleaming bright clothing" announced Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:4). Now, at the beginning of Acts, they appear again. Just as they had had a message for the grieving women at the tomb, they now had a message for the puzzled disciples ("Galileans") at the Mount of Olives, the site of the Ascension.

Their appearance seems like an odd intrusion into the story. The narrative would have continued seamlessly if verse 12 followed verse 9; the men would have naturally returned to Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed. Why, then, did the angels intervene?

The answer lies in the question they posed. It could be paraphrased, "Why are you just standing around, looking up at the sky?" Were the disciples mesmerized by the miracle they'd seen? Were they waiting for Jesus to come back down? Regardless, when the angels added that Jesus would be returning sometime in the future, their message was clear: there's a lot of work to be done before his return, so get to it. The fact that this message was conveyed by suddenly appearing angels emphasized just how important it was for them to start preparing for their mission.

Acts documents the many ways the believers could be distracted from their witness. An overemphasis upon the miraculous, such as Jesus' ascension, was one. Another was persecution and the threat of violence. A third was internal disputes. Whenever such possible distractions arose, the memory of the

angels' appearance served as a reminder to continue focusing on the task ahead. Nothing must distract from introducing people to Jesus.

What things can distract you from deepening your faith? What can distract the church from achieving its mission?

Preparing for the Spirit: Stay Together

When they returned to Jerusalem, they returned to a fellowship of people who had followed Jesus and witnessed his resurrection. Meeting in the upper room of his last supper, that core group was surprisingly diverse. The eleven disciples themselves represented different backgrounds and occupations. Women were included in this inner circle, and we can imagine Mary Magdalene would be among them. Finally, Jesus' own family, mother and brothers, were there.

Despite this diversity, though, Luke noted that they were "united in their devotion to prayer" (verse 14). They may have viewed things differently, but they agreed on the one thing that would have kept them humble: prayer. Praying together would not just have kept them attentive to God, but to one another as well.

Outside this core group were 120 believers. Luke did not describe them as members but as "family"; literally, the Greek word he used translates as "brothers" (verse 15). This is the source of our referring to one another as brother or sister. It is a term of intimacy and endearment. If the believers were to receive power from above, they had to exemplify unity in spirit amid diversity in humanity.

Only by this would they be able to transcend human differences and witness effectively. If they couldn't be open to one another's differences, how could they be open to the different people they would meet as they spread the gospel?

Where have you seen unity in diversity in your church? How does that impact its ministry?

Preparing for the Spirit: Stay Patiently Faithful

In this pre-Pentecost period, the believers focused on being obedient to the instructions given them by the risen Lord. Following those forty days, they continued their faithfulness by intense Scripture study. That would have centered on how the Hebrew texts had been fulfilled by Jesus; this is similar to how the travelers on the Emmaus road and the disciples had had their eyes opened regarding fulfillment of the passages (Luke 24:25-27, 44-45). Peter's speech to the small community (verses 16-22), when he alluded to Psalms in explaining Judas's death, reflected such study.

Their faithfulness was expressed in another manner as well. Jesus had instructed his disciples not to concern themselves about what was going to happen but, instead, to "wait ... only a few days" (verses 4-5). This turned out to be approximately ten days; the period between Passover and Pentecost was seven weeks, and Jesus had been with them for about six.

The early church had no concept of how long it would be. Regardless, there was no sign of impatience; it was as if time didn't matter. The only activity they engaged in was selecting a person to take Judas's place. This was simply honoring the Lord's intention that there be twelve disciples. They wanted to be ready for the baptism by the Holy Spirit, whatever that meant and whenever it would happen.

The believers had witnessed the resurrected Christ, and they were now to bear that witness going forward. Instead of immediately developing plans and timelines, they practiced patient faithfulness. They wanted their hearts and minds ready to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. They wanted to follow wherever the Spirit led without their own agenda getting in the way. Devoting themselves patiently to prayer, study, and community building enabled that.

How does prayer, Bible study, and fellowship enable you to welcome the Holy Spirit? When has such faithfulness led to new insights and directions, both in your life and in the life of your church?

Being Witnesses Today

The story we read today could be understood as a parable for modern Christians. Our faith communities are always living during in-between times. We are constantly faced with new opportunities as well as new challenges. How can we confront such occasions in a Spirit-led manner, affirming that "God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled" (2 Timothy 1:7)?

It is helpful to filter whatever we encounter in our discipleship through the eyes of the early Christians we read about today. Faced with an unknown future, they would have asked themselves certain questions.

What new things are we learning? What new directions are before us? (Be open.)

How does this impact what God is calling us to do? (Stay focused.)

What do the different voices in our community say about this? What can we learn from one another, and what resources can we share with one another? (Stay together.)

What do we learn from Scripture about this? How does this inform what and who we pray for? (Stay patiently faithful.)

Such reflections were essential for the early church pre-Pentecost, and they're essential for us post-Pentecost. For example, if you were one of the leaders of the church described in the introduction, how do you imagine asking such questions would have helped discern the Spirit's direction in moving ahead? What new outreach programs might have arisen? How could the family life center have been used in new ways?

One unique challenge that our ancestors didn't face but we do is that of social media. When something happens within or outside congregational walls, misinformation can accompany it. Emotional generalizations can turn opportunities for new understandings and directions into congregational landmines. The questions congregations ask themselves to be faithful to the Holy Spirit are also the

questions each church member must ask. When each disciple follows the example of the pre-Pentecost church, knee-jerk reactions are kept to a minimum.

Our spiritual emphasis for this unit, practicing silence, is essential in turning situations we face into opportunities for the Holy Spirit to lead. In setting aside time for stepping back from the posts we read and the inner voices we hear, we may eventually discover the quiet nudging of the Spirit. Our eyes can see a broader, more complete picture.

This week, imagine the scene we studied today. Focus on Jesus about to ascend, and the disciples around him. Silence your mind, letting the scene speak to you. Perhaps this will enable you to hear the small voice of the Spirit. You may be invited, in a new way, to introduce Jesus to people who don't know Jesus.

Which of the four ways of preparing for the Spirit is most challenging for you? Why?

Master, you invite us to wait when we want to act, and to be quiet when we want to speak. Help us open ourselves to you, that we may follow where you lead. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Daily Bible Readings: May 18: 2 Kings 2:9-11, May 19:1 Timothy 3:14-16, May 20: Psalm 33:13-22, May 21: Psalm 8, May 22: Luke 3:15-17, May 23: 2 Peter 3:11-18, May 24: Acts 1:1-11

The Spiritual Practice of Discipline

In this unit, we will focus on becoming comfortable with silence, an essential spiritual discipline. Seeking quiet solitude is modeled in Scripture, from Elijah hearing a still, small voice in a cave to Jesus venturing into the wilderness to spend time alone. Underlying this is the reality that God comes to us in such stillness. As Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen explained, "It requires a lot of inner solitude and silence to become aware of these divine movements. God does not shout, scream, or push. The Spirit of God is soft and gentle like a small voice or a light breeze."¹

We instinctively know how important this stillness is for the nurture of our souls. The refrain from the classic hymn "In the Garden" describes it idealistically: "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own."² This was written in 1913, though, well before smartphones. Today it wouldn't necessarily be easy to take that walk without listening to music or podcasts, or checking email or social media. How can we hear Jesus if we've grown accustomed to endless background noises?

Perhaps we have difficulty with silence because it makes us anxious. When I begin a quiet time, random thoughts intrude; sometimes I find things to add to the grocery list! It's as if, given our noisiness, we need to fill the void with the sound of our inner voices. Are we afraid of what God's soft and gentle Spirit might say?

Each lesson in this unit provides an opportunity to practice silence. Using some basic meditation techniques, such as focusing on your breathing or a peaceful image, will be helpful. However, the biggest help will be the mindset we take with us into the stillness. Sometimes filling our minds with distracting voices is a way of being in control. To come to God with a willingness to be still and listen reflects a willingness to truly let the Lord encounter and direct us. As we become more comfortable relinquishing control of our lives to God, the more comfort we'll find in the stillness.

Silence is something we need. Like the young Samuel, we yearn to hear God quietly calling our name. Our life changes when we can respond to that small voice with "Speak. Your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10b).

1 From Henri J. M. Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved* (Colorado Springs: Convergent Books, 2017).

2 From "In the Garden," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 314.