

## SURPRISE! USED BY GOD

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John 1: 29-34

Mark Dunn

When I reminisce about our experience at Southeastern Seminary in North Carolina, mental pictures of the faces of those who shared their special stories with us are formed in my mind. There is one family in particular who had received an appointment to be agricultural missionaries in Africa. Except for their college years, this husband and wife had been farmers all their lives. They had sold almost everything they owned, including the farm equipment. Now, with their two small children and their remaining belongings, they were packed into a small two bedroom seminary apartment. There could be no going back.

Why was this couple tearing themselves up from their rural roots and engaging in such a risky endeavor? Theologically, they felt called and were empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the will of God. As I listened to their story, I have to admit there was that small voice in me which cries out for security which kept saying, "these people are insane."

I share that story to introduce the theme for this morning's reflection; "the movement of God's Holy Spirit in our lives." There is a great deal of mystery associated with God's Spirit. It is not something we can truly understand with empirical research. To tackle this theme is like walking on egg shells. I don't want to speak for the Almighty when the Divine hasn't spoken or be naively pious in my thoughts. I also agree with Leslie Weatherhead, that to speak of the Holy Spirit doesn't "make any image in (our) minds."(p.145) However, let us attempt to get a handle on this illusive mystery and establish what this means for us now.

### I. CREATING AN IMAGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

When I think of the Holy Spirit I immediately imagine a fog slowly drifting into an open meadow. The fog gently penetrates the surrounding forests and the grass, giving fresh moisture and vitality. Others might imagine a ghost created by artificial lighting in a haunted house. However, these images don't provide the same understanding as theology and scripture.

A. In traditional theology, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. The theologian Karl Barth said that "the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ."(p.138) Barth's statement is validated with Jesus' statement to his disciples when he said "I send the promise of my Father upon you." Translated from Biblical Greek the term means wind or breath which implies that it is the "bearer of life."(p.689)

B. However, we obtain a clearer understanding of the Holy Spirit when we observe what it does. In short, the Holy Spirit empowers persons for kingdom tasks and kingdom responsibilities.(p.525) Like adrenalin empowers the body, the Holy Spirit empowers the will. The Christ promised that we "shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come" upon us. Through it we are called and empowered to use our gifts as well as confess our sins. It produces vitality and liveliness within the community of faith. This means the work of the Holy Spirit was definitely present at our last annual meeting. This means it can empower someone to stay awake during a very dry sermon. I hope the Holy Spirit will heat this sermon up in due time.

C. The important point about the Holy Spirit is that it is free to move where it wills. It is free to rest like a dove on the willing and the unwilling. The Holy Spirit is free to empower the Christian and the non-Christian. This may seem strange to believers, but scripture indicates that God will "pour out His spirit upon all flesh." Elizabeth O'Conner in her book "Search for Silence" said that this is how we explain the fact that those persons who reject the church and are even agnostic in their beliefs; yet Christ's spirit of love is still working in their lives. "The Holy Spirit," says the process theologian John Cobb, "has its impact upon our mode of existence whether or not we consciously believe in it."(32)

## II. DOING WHAT THE SPIRIT IS LEADING

The work of the Holy Spirit is to call and empower human beings to build God's Kingdom of love. It is free to rest like a dove on the shoulders of the believing and the unbelieving. Throughout the "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit, any human being "can be used by God."(Jung, p.51)

A. This means that some people may be used without them really knowing that. An example can be the unlikely person of King James the 1st. From what we know about him he was the most unlikely candidate to be used by the Holy Spirit. He was an alcoholic and was rumored to be addicted to all kinds of unmentionable vices. As king of England he married off his children like pawns to suit his foreign policy. He drained the royal treasury to meet the cost of his extravagancies.

He persecuted our Congregational ancestors, the Separatists, which motivated them to escape to America in 1620. But this unlikely character also assembled Biblical scholars who produced the Authorized Translation of the Bible. This probably is the most influential translation of scripture that has yet to be published. If I were to ask you to repeat the 23rd Psalm in unison, most of us know it in the King James Version as opposed. God's Spirit used James the 1st and he didn't even know it. This is a reason to pray and to hope that the Holy Spirit will influence Saddam Hussein to seek peace before there is further destruction.

B. If God's Spirit can use us without us knowing it then, do we also have to know what we are doing in order to do the will of God? Does everything we do have to be intentional and have specific goals? Can we serve God by wandering around doing things we think are important but don't really understand why? This is not something I am comfortable doing, nor are most of us. But this is what happened with John the Baptist: "I myself did not know him, but this is why I came baptizing with water..." He responded to God's call without knowing the person who's way he was providing.

When we do step out on faith, sometimes ignorance is bliss. In the February "Readers Digest" Jason Kirkpatrick tells a story of his father who was on a commercial flight into Washington, D.C. Strong winds along the Potomac River made it difficult for the pilot to land the plane. After two attempts the aircraft was circling for another try.

Kirkpatrick's father "noticed that the passenger beside him had a "white-knuckled grip on the armrests." His Dad tried to reassure the man by telling him "don't worry, those people in the cockpit know what they are doing." However, the distraught passenger replied, "you don't understand, I'm a commercial pilot, and I know what they're doing!" Now there were four hands with a white-knuckled grip on the armrests.

A person whom God has entrusted with a gift sets out to develop that gift with years of formal education whether it be lawyer, doctor or businessman. Those lawyers, physicians and business persons who have completed the work don't really need to inform the anxious new student about everything they might encounter. It could discourage them. Knowing what will happen takes away the excitement and possible joy of surprise. Knowing what will happen takes away the excitement of risking for the Kingdom as we are used by God.

### III. TRUSTING IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

We are not always sure where God is leading us, or why. But, if we follow what we believe to be the Lord's leading, we can leave the rest to him.

A. few weeks ago I preached a sermon on anxiety in which I proposed that one way to handle anxiety and stress was to "take charge of one's life through ritual and structure." As all of us know there are some things in life we do not control. We have no control over the weather, although I would like to have my hand on the heavenly thermostat right now. I would turn up the heat significantly. We have to let go and trust in the leading of God's spirit.

A few years ago a speed boat driver was near top speed when his boat veered slightly and hit a wave at a dangerous angle. The combined force of his speed and the size and angle of the wave sent the boat spinning into the air while the driver was thrown from his seat and propelled deep into the water. He went so deep that he became confused as to the direction of the surface. Panic would have made him fight the water and he probably would have drowned. However, he just relaxed and let the buoyancy of his life vest begin to pull him up. Once he relaxed and trusted, he found the right direction and now he could swim toward the surface.

B. Sometimes as individuals and as a church we find ourselves surrounded by confusing options, too deeply immersed in our problems to know "which way is up." When this happens, we too, need to remain calm and wait for the gentle tug of God's Spirit to pull us in the proper direction. My goal after graduating from seminary was to do a one year chaplaincy internship in a hospital. The hospital was selected, I applied and completed the interview. However, two weeks before I was to be accepted into the internship, I accepted a position as minister for a rural church in North Georgia. Had it not been for that choice, I would not be at First Congregational today.

Sometimes we just need to relax and wait for God's gentle tug in the right direction.

### CONCLUSION

I wish I could give you an update on the family who followed the leading of the Holy Spirit to Africa. I wish I could tell you that I talked to them the other day and they told me their work as agricultural missionaries is challenging and rewarding. I wish I could tell you that the decision they made proved to be the Holy Spirit guiding and sustaining them. I can't. What I can do is conclude with an illustration.

Did you know that sharks are a very popular exotic fish for aquariums because a fully matured shark in an aquarium will only grow to be a few inches long. But you put a shark in an ocean and it will grow to several feet. Upon following the leading of the

Holy Spirit out into the world, that missionary family certainly experienced growth because they were "used by God." Is God using us? Amen.

- Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1959)  
John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976)  
Rodney J. Hunter ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990)  
C.G. Jung, *Answer to Job* (Princeton University Press, 1973)  
Elizabeth O'Conner, *Search for Silence* (Waco: Word Books, 1972)  
Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985)

### Pastoral Prayer

Dear God, our Friend and Companion, we pause this morning for worship and to ponder the alluring silence of your Mystery.

As we enter into a conversation with you, we humbly confess our shortcomings and sin. Sometimes, we forget and criticize when we should have listened. We speak when quiet should have silenced our hearts. We divide the truth to suit our purposes, instead of heeding truth to edify our souls. We wait for opportunities instead of creating them. We hope for maturity and growth instead of claiming our gifts, following the Holy Spirit to join in to do our part.

We have denied our anger and dumped it on an innocent party, particularly family members. We have courted evil and now in retrospect it is difficult to forget what we have done. Father, you have said that if we confess our sins you are faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Help us to not only mentally but inwardly claim that truth.

Dear God, we are thankful for this country and for founding fathers who left open the door to religious diversity and rejected conformity. We pray for the men and women now who risk their lives for freedom. We pray for the intervention and leading of thy Holy Spirit that peace will come soon without further loss of life or further destruction of thy creation.

Father, we pray for thy church in which your Son gave himself. Let the grace of Christ enable us to discern your will and provide us the courage to do it in harmony with all those who love and serve you.

We do not always know how to pray as we ought, but if our words become confusing even to ourselves, you will answer the intent of our hearts. We pray that you will answer the prayers of our hearts and minds. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.