

**Living the Easter Life:
LIFE IN THE SPIRIT**

Acts 2:1-21

God sends the Holy Spirit to give us life.

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
June 4, 2017

Some people get all weird about the Holy Spirit. For some people, the Holy Spirit is everything, and they live from one spiritual high to another. Their faith is all about the next fix of spiritual ecstasy. For others it's like the Holy Spirit is something foreign to our faith in the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is to be avoided. If we're in a historical, traditional denomination, the Holy Spirit is the property of the Pentecostals, not the liturgical churches. We want our religion strictly above the neck, not invading our heart or our gut, and certainly not flowing into our extremities, causing our hands to raise or our feet to dance.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary and preacher, once had a fellow confront him at one of his Ashram retreats. He told Jones that all this talk about the Holy Spirit scared him. He said he was afraid of "rampant emotionalism and off-center oddness."

Jones replied, "But my brother, the power that was in Jesus was the Holy Spirit, and Jesus was the most balanced character that ever moved down the pages of human history. ...He went off into no visions and no dreams. From his guidance, through prayer, you and I get our guidance and are in possession of all his faculties. Are you afraid of being made like Christ? There was nothing psychopathic about him. If he was infinite sanctity he was [also] infinite sanity."¹

Jones shared with his friend the Scripture where Jesus says, "*Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*"² Jones then offered to pray with the man to receive the Holy Spirit, and within a couple of minutes, the man stopped him to say he had received the Holy Spirit in his heart. He went from resistance to receptivity in a matter of minutes.

We've been talking for several weeks about "Living the Easter Life," how the resurrection of Jesus has an impact on the various aspects of our discipleship. We've been talking about making Jesus

Lord over our gifts, our call, our time, our families, our money, and creation. These are not hard concepts to grasp intellectually. But having the power to live this way is a different matter. Where do we get the power to live a Christ-like life? How can we actually do what we know we ought to do? That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit is the resident power of God in the world. The Holy Spirit is Jesus alive in us.

The foundation of this sermon series about the Easter life has been the ministry and teaching of E. Stanley Jones. Last fall when we had the Encounter weekend at the church, it was based on the model of the E. Stanley Jones Christian Ashram. I became reacquainted with some of the powerful ideas of Jones, and I told the leaders of the Encounter that I would spend some time after Easter preaching about what it means to make Jesus Lord. (That's the Ashram gang-sign, three fingers meaning "Jesus Is Lord.")

E. Stanley Jones taught that the fullness of life in Jesus Christ is the Holy Spirit. God gives us the Holy Spirit so that we might experience what Jesus called "life in all its abundance."³ This life in Christ is infinite growth in understanding and experiencing Jesus as Lord of our lives. That life includes gifts, call, time, families, money and creation—and whatever else you're living with—job, grief, illness, mission, purpose, and so forth. Paul said in I Corinthians, "*No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.*"⁴ The Holy Spirit is the engine that powers abundant life.

The problem is, we often stop short of experiencing the Holy Spirit in our spiritual life. Easter we get, but we never quite get to Pentecost. E. Stanley Jones felt the church had missed a step in not emphasizing the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said, "The church is living between Easter and Pentecost. Easter stands for life wrought out, offered: Pentecost stands for life appropriated, lived to its fullest, unafraid and clearly and powerfully witnessing to an adequate way of human living. The church stands hesitant between the two."⁵

The power of Jesus consists in four movements of his life. He lived on the earth as the incarnation of God. He died on the cross. He rose again from the dead. And he lives in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The first three are Easter. The fourth is Pentecost. Jones said, “To take the first three, but to stop short of the fourth, is the supreme tragedy of present-day Christian living.”⁶

So the Holy Spirit is not something to be avoided. It’s not something to be scared of or something that is weird or odd. It doesn’t just belong to Pentecostal religion (although they got the name). The gift of the Holy Spirit is a fundamental part of our Christian faith. It is the normal experience of the disciple of Jesus. It’s a gift God wants each of us to have.

Jones shared how he first received the gift of the Holy Spirit: “[About a year after my conversion] I got a hold of a little book called *The Christian’s Secret To A Happy Life* by a Quaker woman, Hannah Whitall Smith. I began to read it. I got to the forty-second page when something, a voice within me, spoke and said, “Now is the time to receive the Holy Spirit.” I said, “I don’t know what I want. This book is telling me, let me read it. ...When I finish this book, I’ll begin to seek, but not now, for I don’t know what it is all about.” But the voice was persistent, “Now is the time to get it.” ...I tried to read on, but the word were literally blurred, so I saw that I was in a controversy. I dropped to my knees beside my bed, and I said, “Lord, what shall I do?” And He said to me, “Will you give me your all?” I thought a moment, and I said, “Why, yes I will. I will lay it all on your altar.” “Well,” he said, “Take my all. And the altar sanctifies the gift.” I said, “Yes, I believe that,” and I arose from my knees. I said, “Yes, it’s done.” I walked around the room pushing my hands this way and that, as though I was pushing doubt away. I did that for I don’t know how many minutes when suddenly I was filled—wave after wave—of divine fire seemed to be going through my being—purging, cleansing. I could only walk the floor with tears of joy flowing down my cheeks, in praise. He

had moved in. And then life seemed to be unified at a deeper level. I didn't seem to be at war with myself as I had been before.⁷

In Scripture, God moved in on the Day of Pentecost. This common, ragtag, mostly working-class group of men and women had come to love Jesus and had followed him to his death. But the resurrection had not empowered them; it had only confused them. Even as recently as ten days before Pentecost, the risen Jesus was with the disciples, talking and eating, and they still asked him, "*Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*"⁸ They just didn't get it. So Jesus told them to wait.

Then Pentecost happened. The wind of God blew; the fire ignited; they spoke the Gospel in languages they had not learned. It was a crazy scene. But it was more than just an ecstatic or emotional experience. From that point on, things were different. Weakness became strength. Fear became courage. Confusion became knowledge. Inadequacy became excellence. Timid silence became bold witness. If you draw a line through the New Testament marking the transformation of the disciples, the line cuts straight through Pentecost.⁹

The most spectacular example of this is Peter. A common fisherman, he irritated Jesus by refusing to believe Jesus would have to suffer. He boasted that he would never forsake Jesus, but when Jesus was arrested, Peter was so weak a servant girl intimidated him into denying Jesus three times. But on Pentecost Peter stood and proclaimed the story of Jesus so powerfully that 3,000 people were converted. Peter became the leader of the early church and died a martyr's death for the love of Jesus.

Something changed Peter. It was the Holy Spirit. Is the Holy Spirit still around? Yes. Can it still empower and transform the life of disciples? Yes. Can we receive the Holy Spirit, even today? Absolutely! How does that happen? E. Stanley Jones gave his hearers four simple steps:

1. Understand that it is God's intention to give you the Holy Spirit. God wants you to have this. It is your birthright as a believer in Jesus. You don't have to overcome any reluctance on the part of God to give you this gift.

2. Make it your intention to receive the Holy Spirit. This is not casual Christianity. This is going deep. This is opening yourself up to a whole new level of spiritual life. You have to want this.

3. Offer yourself to God in complete surrender. It's no longer about me; it's about God. If we give our all, our everything to God, then God will give himself completely to us—the fullness of life in the Spirit.

4. Receive the gift by faith. God wants to give it; we believe it; we want it; we ask for it. Why would it not happen? It may not be really emotional or cataclysmic. You may not get the wind, fire, and tongues of Pentecost. But you can trust that God will do what God promises to do, and you can receive it.¹⁰

Nobody can do this for you. Your church, your pastor, your family, your friends can support you and encourage you. But finally it comes down to your relationship with God and your ability to surrender yourself in faith to the Lord Jesus.

There is an old story about a young man who was seeking to know God, so he went to visit the hermitage of an old and wise holy man. He found the old man sitting at the doorway of his hut watching the sunset. The old man's dog lay beside him while the young seeker laid out his spiritual quest. "Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God are zealous in prayer but quit after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?"

The old man smiled and replied, "Let me tell you a story. One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. My dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after the rabbit. He chased the rabbit with a passion. Soon other dogs joined in, attracted by his barking. This pack of barking dogs ran across the creeks, up stony embankments,

and through thickets full of thorns. But gradually, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the chase, discouraged by the rough terrain. Only my dog continued to pursue the rabbit.”

The young man was puzzled. “Abba, I don’t understand. What do dogs chasing rabbits have to do with knowing God?”

“You fail to understand,” the old man said, “because you do not ask the right question. Why did the other dogs drop out of the chase? Because they had not seen the rabbit. Unless you see your prey, the chase is just too difficult. You will lack the passion and determination necessary to perform all the hard work required by the discipline of your spiritual exercises.”

I want to invite you to see the rabbit today. Welcome the Holy Spirit into your heart. Experience the risen Christ in you. This is not weird stuff. This is normal discipleship. This is the good gift that the Father wants you to have. This is where the power comes from, the power to transform your weakness into strength, your fear into courage, your anxiety into peace, your sadness into joy. This is the power to bring all the elements of your life—gifts, call, time, family relationships, money and creation—into alignment with the will of God for your life. This is the power to run the race until you win the prize of eternal life.

¹ E. Stanley Jones, in Anne Mathews-Younes, *Living Upon the Way* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 2008), 180.

² Luke 11:11-13.

³ John 10:10.

⁴ I Corinthians 12:3.

⁵ Mathews-Younes, 174.

⁶ Eunice Jones Mathews and James K. Mathews, *Selections from E. Stanley Jones* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 58.

⁷ E. Stanley Jones, “The Gift of the Holy Spirit is the Birthright of All Christians,” in Mathews-Younes, 184f.

⁸ Acts 1:6.

⁹ E. Stanley Jones, in *Selections*, 58.

¹⁰ E. Stanley Jones, in Mathews-Younes, 188f., 204.