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## **Jesus' Alter Ego**

### **Acts 2:1-13**

In 2002, I began leading a Bible Study for the women of the church. Our mission was to take the Bible one chapter at a time beginning with Genesis. We have done just that. But, somewhere in the meantime we have covered all manner of topics and one day among our discussions, Jeck Warren said, "I wish someone would preach a sermon about the Holy Spirit. Too many people don't understand what the Holy Spirit is." Immediately, my brain began churning . . . when could I do that? It really should be related to Pentecost. I would wait then for the opportunity to arise when Pentecost and my chance to preach coincided. Never did I think it would be one of my last Sundays on the job! Though Pentecost is technically next Sunday, this is my last Sunday to preach before you, so I decided to make it Pentecost to serve the purpose of honoring Jeck's request . . . finally! Frankly, in hindsight, waiting this long to preach on this topic is really a cop-out on my part.

Maybe it was the daunting nature of speaking about the vastness of the Holy Spirit? How in the world does one really nail down who the Holy Spirit is? Yet, we know that the Bible is replete with references to the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Old Testament, we hear about it. We are told that David longed for the comfort of God's Spirit. The prophets foretold of its coming. Jesus foretold of its coming and now in this passage it is here. But here even the people in the streets of Jerusalem are left to ask the question what does this mean? Many of the onlookers seek to explain it by saying that the people are drunk. Their explanation is a cop-out for what they cannot or better, what they will not, choose to understand.

We do that in our so-called practice of the faith, you know. When I was coming along, the church I grew up in held Vacation Bible School at night so that the Adults could have their own Bible School session. Most every evening we children gathered on the playground waiting for our parents to pick us up. As an older child, I was anxious to hang out with the adults or the teenagers—anyone older than those pip-squeaks on the playground. So I would stay as close to the gate of the playground as possible and when I saw my mother in the distance, I would make my exit to get near her. One evening I overheard a conversation she was having with a woman after their class. The topic of the evening for them had been evangelism. This woman was convinced, as I have heard so many people represent through the years, that she didn't feel the need to tell other people about her faith verbally. Her faith was personal and her witness to others occurred in the way she lived her life. What a cop-out!

I realized even then what a cop-out that was. My personal understanding of that was made richer by another overheard conversation about that lady. I was an eavesdropper, can you tell? What I heard was my mother relating the story to my father, unaware of my presence. I could hear the frustration in my mother's voice. Did the woman know that others in the church saw her as the biggest gossip around? Did she know that she had been seen cutting off someone in traffic? Did she realize that she had been rude to a neighbor in the grocery store? Is that the faith that she really wants to portray? It seems her

story of faith might redeem her actions if she would tell it. Faith may be personal but with all of its bumps and bruises, it was meant to be shared.

The Holy Spirit is personal. What happened in that upper room (or whatever the place was—we are not told exactly,) was personal. It would have been easy for the disciples to have found ways to explain it away or not to explain it at all. For that matter it would have been easy for them to have been going about their business and not even bother to gather. After all, fifty days had passed since that Resurrection Sunday we call Easter and in those fifty days they had chosen to wait for this event. They knew that Jesus had made a promise that his Spirit, his alter ego, his intimate friend who knew his thoughts and ways of being, would come upon them. They didn't really know what that meant. They knew that he said that they would be empowered and they would do things that were greater than even the things he did. They didn't really know what they were waiting for but they trusted that they would know it when they saw it . . . and know it they did.

Can you imagine what it must have been like in that room? It had to have been like being in a car accident where you see this thing happening, you are powerless to do anything about it, you are taken up in the moment and all of life operates in slow motion. Yet in a blink of an eye the moment is over and you are left to make sense of it. What does this mean?

The sound crashes in. The wind with all of its violence envelopes the room and every being present. Then, as if picking out each one of the disciples individually a fire breaks forth and a shoot or tongue of the central fire lands on each individual simultaneously. It sounds like a scene from a horror movie! It's scary!

A visiting pastor found himself meeting and greeting the members of a church after a worship service and he noticed a woman off to the side. The situation was such that he could make his way to her without interrupting the flow of things. So, he asked her if she was member. "Oh, no I'm not member." "Are you a member at another church?" "Oh, no I don't go to church. My family didn't go to church when I was growing up and I've been curious about church but resolved not to come." "How is that you are here now?" "That man over there invited me. I work with him and he told me that I should come today." "What is it that has kept you from coming to church before now?" "Church is scary!"

Church is scary! It should be scary because the Holy Spirit should be here. The in-breaking of the Holy Spirit into our lives is scary. It's scary because it is beyond our control. It moves us to do things that we would never do—like go to church—or speak in languages in which we might well not be fluent. It leaves even the most intelligent among us unable to figure it out and even those who refuse to explain it away are left with questions: what does this mean?

The Spirit of God has come. What does this mean? The question only begs more questions. How do we know the Spirit of God and who is this Spirit of God really?

To know the Spirit of God we have to first desire a relationship with God and often it is God's very Spirit that places within us the desire to know God. To know the Spirit of God we have to put our

differences aside. We are told that the disciples who gathered were in one accord. We have to ready ourselves to learn. The disciples were in the room waiting—preparing their hearts. We can't learn overnight what the Holy Spirit is because the best lessons come in experiencing relationship with the Spirit.

If you are married, likely you do not know everything there is to know about your spouse. Every day you are offered a new lesson about that person with whom you have chosen to journey through this life. Every day, there may well be something that surprises you about your spouse if you let yourself open your eyes and see that person. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. We learn who the spirit is through relationship. But to get to that relationship we have to position ourselves in prayer. Just like the disciples, we have to seek God out—praying and learning to listen because God will speak through the Spirit.

How do we know the Spirit of God? We know it when we trust ourselves fully to God's care, surrender our own ways and listen for the Spirit all around us.

Who then is the Spirit of God? The simple answer is that the Spirit is the manifestation of God that comes in the absence of Jesus physical presence. The Spirit has the same authority of Jesus and is what makes the Godhead triune. But it is only through the experience of the Spirit that we can know who the Spirit really is. For with that relationship, we learn that the Spirit can help us discern the truth. It brings understanding. It is our teacher and it teaches us that righteousness is stronger than evil. It can be our best friend if we let it and in that relationship we learn that the Spirit is peacemaker, encourager, joy-giver, counselor, guide, protector and advocate. The spirit is one who empowers us to proclaim the message of our faith; to rise above our fearful desires to cop out. The spirit inspires confidence. It is to be glorified equally with the Father and the Son. If the essence of life is relationship, then without the Holy Spirit there is no life.

There was a young woman to whom life seemed like a tremendous fight. She struggled through day after day. Wearing by life, she wanted to give up. One day she found herself pouring her heart out before her mother. "Every time one problem is solved she complained, another arises!" Her mother said nothing to her at first but motioned for her to follow her to the kitchen. She placed three pots of water on the stove and brought water to a boil in each. In the first pot she placed some carrots. In the second pot, she placed some eggs. In the third pot she placed some coffee beans. Twenty minutes passed and not a word was shared between mother and daughter. The mother, then took the carrots out and put them in a bowl. She put the eggs in a bowl and the coffee she ladled into a third bowl. She looked at her daughter and said, "What do you see?" I see, "Carrots, eggs and coffee." Her mother brought her closer and had her feel the carrots. They were soft. She had her take an egg and break it. The egg was hard-boiled. She asked her to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled at the richness of the flavor. She turned to her mother and asked the same question as those on the streets of Jerusalem: what does this mean?

Each item faced the same adversity—boiling water. Each item reacted differently. The carrot went in strong and hard but the water made it soft and weak. The egg was fragile before but the water hardened it thanks to the protective shell. But the coffee beans changed the water.

When we get ourselves out of the way and let the Spirit of God infuse our very beings, we find that we are not only changed but we are able to change the world around us. The woman's message to her daughter was to let the Spirit change her in a way that made her view the world selflessly.

The disciples surrendered. They let God infuse the whole of their beings such that they spoke the language of every person around and could communicate God's message to all of God's people. Aren't we supposed to be the kind of the people that are so infused with God that we are empowered to speak God's message to all people? Yet we let ourselves get in the way. We cling to fear. We cop out in fear of what others might think of us never stopping to imagine the wonder of what others might think of us if we let the Spirit speak through our lives.

Fred Craddock is one of our nation's top preachers and I always look forward to hearing him preach. I had that privilege once again in March of this year at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina meeting. He was admonishing preachers about getting so caught up in the ritual of religion and being such elitists that they missed the point altogether. He was noting that we have to let the Spirit move with our worship and within our parishioners. He told the story of being in a church on a day when a number of the adolescents in the church were making their professions of faith. He said that he was sitting toward the back so hearing was a bit difficult but the observation was clear. Several young people sat on the front pew. The last one looked to be a slight bit older judging from his larger structure. The pastor went to each person and asked them: Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that he died to save you from your sins? The rest of the phrase was garbled to one's hearing. The first boy stood up and said, "uh huh." The pastor moved to the second young person and began to form the words of his question, "Do you, blah, blah, blah?" The young lady stood up—"Uh huh." She replied. Then the third person, "Do you, blah, blah, blah?" The response came back, "uh huh." The responses engendered by the pastor's question seemed like such cop-outs. This went on all the way down the row until the pastor came to the older looking boy who was so filled with the Spirit that he beat the pastor to the punch. "I believe that Jesus Christ is my savior. He died on the cross for my sins and rose again and now the Spirit of God lives in my heart!" The young man was exuberant. When the service was over Craddock approached the pastor and said, "That last young man . . ." The pastor said, "I know . . . he's retarded."