

**“God Speaks”**

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron  
January 10, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

**Hymns for Worship Video – January 10, 2021**

“Morning has Broken” #814 in the Book of Praise

*Eleanor Farjeon / Eric Lagerström*

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Morning has broken  
Like the first morning  
Blackbird has spoken  
Like the first bird  
Praise for the singing  
Praise for the morning  
Praise for them springing  
Fresh from the Word

Sweet the rain's new fall  
Sunlit from heaven  
Like the first dew fall  
On the first grass  
Praise for the sweetness  
Of the wet garden  
Sprung in completeness  
Where His feet pass

Mine is the sunlight  
Mine is the morning  
Born of the one light  
Eden saw play  
Praise with elation  
Praise ev'ry morning  
God's recreation  
Of the new day

“Breathe on me Breath of God” #389 in the Book of Praise

*Edwin Hatch / Robert Jackson*

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Breathe on me breath of God  
Fill me with life anew  
That I may love what Thou dost love  
And do what Thou wouldst do

Breathe on me breath of God  
Until my heart is pure  
Until with Thee I will one will  
To do and to endure

Breathe on me breath of God  
Till I am wholly Thine  
Till all this earthly part of me  
Glows with Thy fire divine

Breathe on me breath of God  
So shall I never die  
But live with Thee the perfect life  
Of Thine eternity

“Shall we Gather at the River” #797 in the Book of Praise

*Robert Lowry*

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*2<sup>nd</sup> verse from the Book of PRAISE*

Shall we gather at the river  
Where bright angel feet have trod  
With its crystal tide forever  
Flowing by the throne of God

*Chorus*

Yes we'll gather at the river  
The beautiful the beautiful river  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God

On the bosom of the river  
Where the Saviour King we own  
We shall meet and sorrow never  
'neath the glory of the throne

*Chorus*

Ere we reach the shining river  
Lay we ev'ry burden down  
Grace our spirits will deliver  
And provide a robe and crown

*Chorus*

Soon we'll reach the shining river  
Soon our pilgrimage will cease  
Soon our happy hearts will quiver  
With the melody of peace

*Chorus*

Closing Chorus: "Walk with the Lord"

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Walk with the Lord  
Go from this place  
filled with his everlasting grace  
Walk with the Lord  
Go where he leads  
blessed by his love and his peace  
Each day you live in all you do  
let the light of Christ be found in you  
Walk with the Lord  
Trust and obey  
Go now and serve him in faith  
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

**Scripture Texts: Acts 19:1-7**

**19** While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. **2** He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." **3** Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." **4** Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." **5** On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6** When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— **7** altogether there were about twelve of them.

**Mark 1:4-11**

**4** John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. **8** I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

**9** In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11** And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

## **Meditation**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This month marks twenty-four years since I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. It's not a significant anniversary, but at this time of the year I always reflect on how ministry has progressed and changed since my time as a student at Knox College. That is the significant part, especially over the past year when most of us have had to learn all kinds of new ways to approach the sometimes daunting task of being a Teaching Elder. Ministry has indeed changed since 1997. Leadership in general has changed in the church as the needs of the church and the communities we serve have changed dramatically. The challenges are tough, as they have always been for the church, and each era has its own area of focus when it comes to the challenges we face.

I'm not sure anything could have really prepared me for some of the things I've experienced in ministry since I was ordained at the front of Paterson Memorial Church in Sarnia. I remember there was a large number of clergy there. The Moderator of the Presbytery, at the meeting before the service, took note of the number of people that would be coming forward for the laying on of hands, and gave the instruction that they were to stand in layers, so to speak, so that the people closest to me could put their hands directly on my head and shoulders. Those further out could lay their hands on the shoulders of the people in front of them so there would be a flowing of the Spirit through the whole group to me. His concern was the weight of all those people trying to add their hands on my shoulders. I knew the significance of the weight I would carry as I began in professional ministry, but I hadn't anticipated how much of that weight would be carried by the strength of the Holy Spirit with which I was blessed that day. My dear friend Lynn, who was ordained in her home Presbytery on the same day, just about choked on her coffee last week when I asked her if she had noticed the same changes in ministry from then until now. She laughed and said nothing could have prepared us for what we actually do to lead the church 24 years later!

In our current context, congregations are having to rethink how we are "being the church" in our communities. Community needs are more urgent and acute. Congregational needs are too, and many are closing. The management of pastoral care has gone through a radical transformation. Worship continues to be at the centre of the church's life, but the pressure on worship leaders to prepare Gospel-centred, multi-generationally attractive services is high. How do we provide worship that keeps the integrity of preaching the Gospel intact, and still reaches a multi-media, multi-focused culture? It's not easy. We need to lean on the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and acknowledge it in ways we may not be used to doing.

It has been a really long time since the church could assume people would be drawn to it instinctively. It has been a really long time since the idea of doing things the way we always have has been an effective approach to ministry, including the day-to-day management of the church. It doesn't set us up for an easy time, and the current reality of the pandemic is making it even more complicated, and stressful.

However, as I said a minute ago, we must acknowledge and lean on the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit more intentionally than perhaps we have in the past. We must, and

mercifully, we can. That is what gives life and energy to the church. That is what helps the church to be successful in our mission to spread the Gospel and serve our Lord in the world.

In the story of Jesus' baptism, we see the Holy Spirit at work as it descends upon Jesus and blesses him for ministry. We see it at work as Jesus acknowledges its descent and hears God speak. But even before that, we see the Spirit at work as it prompts John to say what needs to be said, and point to the One that is about to change everything.

John has an experience that some clergy have had in the church. He has followers. People come out to hear him preach and to be baptized by him because they think he may be the one they've been waiting for. They confess their sins to him which may indicate they are seeking forgiveness from him. They become his disciples. But John knows he must keep their focus on the One for whom he is preparing the way. He must remind them he is not the one that can forgive their sins and save them from sin. He is constantly pointing to another, away from himself because there is another, more powerful One on his way.

I have heard stories over the years of clergy that have developed a following, people that almost seem to worship the minister rather than the One to whom the Minister ought to be pointing. I've heard stories about people leaving the church when the Minister moves to another community or retires. Some have followed a Minister from one congregation to another because they simply cannot let go. It always saddens me to hear these stories, because the church suffers when a leader becomes an idol, a hero. The focus is not where it is supposed to be – on Christ. Yes, clergy hold a particular position of leadership in the church, and it is good when a Minister is loved and respected by a congregation. But clergy are not the ones who hung on the cross and rose from the grave. Our role is different, yes, but it is a role that points to another, more powerful One. Our role is to keep the church focused on the Son of God. It is our role to make disciples of Jesus, not collect them for ourselves.

In the past week we saw this kind of loyalty get so out of control that it became deadly, and it invoked fear and anger in the hearts of many. The protests that became violent took over our television and computer screens and we could not get away from the scene playing out before us in the U.S. capital. A world leader has a following of people that follows to an irrational extreme. What we saw happening in Washington was the result of people blindly following a President that pointed them in a dangerous direction, and it had disastrous consequences. We watched as the most powerful leader in the free world incited chaos and violence. And we watched as more racial injustice played out in the response to the mob-like mindset. Lives were endangered, and a broken, divided nation was furthered damaged to the point that no one seems to know if it can be repaired. Leadership is meant to point people in a good direction, not to amass disciples to blindly follow on a misguided path.

Today's text from Acts portrays the gap between following one who points to Jesus, and following Jesus. Paul arrives in Ephesus and encounters some who have received John's baptism, but when he asks if they received the Holy Spirit when they came to believe in Jesus, they say they've never even heard of the Holy Spirit. I can imagine Paul's response to that. 'Really? How can you say you believe in the Christ and yet not know about his Spirit? If you haven't been blessed by the Spirit, then into what were you baptized?'

So Paul gathers them and baptizes them in the name of Jesus. *When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:6).*

When these people had received the blessing of the Spirit, they were fully engaged with Jesus! This was quite different from John's baptism. Now they would understand what John meant when he said someone more powerful than he was coming. More powerful indeed. John's baptism had prepared them for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But I'm not sure anything could have really prepared them for what they experienced that day as Paul laid his hands on them, in the name of Jesus.

When Jesus was baptized by John in the story from Mark's Gospel, he did not receive the same baptism the rest of the people had, because he could not. Instead, he received the baptism of the Spirit, with the voice of God speaking clearly to affirm Jesus' identity and purpose. He could not receive the same as the others because he was not the same as the others. Jesus was, and continues to be, unique among all people of every colour, background, gender and means. He is the Son of God, so his baptism set him apart;

just as his conception and birth set him apart;

just as his ministry of teaching and healing would set him apart;

just as his death and resurrection set him apart.

I love the image of the heavens being 'torn' open for the Spirit to descend. There was no question about the seriousness of this event, no doubt about the massive impact it would have. This vivid images tells us this is something to which we must pay attention. These are the kinds of details that convey the awesome nature of God at work in creation, in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit.

And yet, in the midst of the imagery of the heavens being torn apart and the strong voice of God declaring Jesus' identity, the Spirit descends, the Gospel says, like a dove. A dove! Such a gentle creature with a soothing song. They are a universal symbol of peace and love, sweet-tempered and have even been recommended as excellent pets! What an image of God's nature. Our Creator is strong enough to stop the world from spinning if he so chooses, and yet touches us as gently as one of the most soothing creatures on earth. He makes himself vulnerable enough to be unjustly condemned to die on a cross, and yet overcomes the ultimate power of death by raising Jesus from the tomb.

Wow.

What an amazing God we worship.

What an amazing Saviour we praise.

What an amazing Spirit that keeps us within the fold of God's love.

No matter how he chooses to do it, God speaks. God speaks through the Word and through people.

God speaks through pillars of fire and cloud, a burning bush, angels, dreams and blinding visions.

God speaks through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter.

God speaks through an apostle to confused disciples; through the baptizer to the baptized.

God speaks through parents to children, through children to parents; through neighbour to neighbour.

God speaks through first responders to people in crisis;  
through caregivers to care receivers;  
through front line workers to those who are ill.

God speaks through the encouraging words of a congregation to its Minister, and through Ministers to the congregations we serve and love.

God speaks through the Holy Spirit as powerfully as thunder, and as gently as a dove.

God speaks as often, as loudly, as softly or as surprisingly as he chooses.

And when God speaks, the Spirit prompts us to listen. *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased (Mark 1:11)*. It wasn't just Jesus who heard those words. We hear them too, affirming who Jesus is, without any doubt.

He is the Son of God;

Emmanuel – God with us;

the risen Christ;

the Saviour – our Saviour.

God is speaking to you in these opening days of a new year. Are you listening? Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you recognize God's voice, no matter how it comes to you, and to be blessed by what you hear. Be a blessing to others as they listen for God's voice. Pray for the world and its leaders to be listening to God's voice. And give thanks for God's willingness to listen to us too. Amen.