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1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42
Lingering with the Spirit

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is woven from four Bible verses. Sometimes my sermon is spun from a single verse, the verse seeming so very rich the more I think about it. This time, four verses have captured my attention and I love each one so much that I am unwilling to set any of them aside. I think they form a connected whole. Let's see.

My first verse is from our Gospel Lesson. It speaks of one of the chief characteristics of our Lord Jesus. It speaks of a stability in him -- a spiritual stability:

³²And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it *remained* on him.

In my next verse, this Jesus upon whom the Spirit abides, turns and contemplates *us*. He gazes upon us who would follow him and asks us a simple but soul-searching question. The occasion for the question is the coming to Jesus of two of the disciples of John the Baptist. They have heard the testimony of John that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" So, they begin to follow Jesus, with this resulting exchange:

³⁸Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" (John 1:38, RSV)

The third verse on my mind is the answer of Jesus to the two disciples when they ask him where he lives. Pay attention to the order of the verbs in this verse. Jesus answers saying,

³⁹He said to them, "*Come and see.*" (John 1:39, RSV)

Come to Jesus, and in the coming, you will see him. Do not wait to see and understand before coming. Just the reverse, "Come and see."

And my fourth verse pins down the meaning of this for you and me by urging a holy ambition upon us when we come to Jesus. That high aim is "saintliness." And so, St. Paul writes this to the Corinthians:

²To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called to be[now note this wonderful word:] saints* together with all

those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:2, RSV)

So, let's work our way through these four verses, one at a time.

First, not only did the Spirit descend upon Jesus, but it *remained* with him. The Baptist had been alerted in advance to this abiding of the Spirit:

³²And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it *remained* on him. ³³I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and *remain*, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' (John 1:32-33, RSV)

For Jesus, then, there was nothing fickle about his spirituality. He was filled to the brim with love of God and love of humanity -- the very loves to which you and I are called too, except that our love is tempted toward inconstancy.

Glad to say, some of us have known the joy and love of the Lord. The very Spirit of God has descended upon us and lifted our hearts, making it easy then to resist sin, to turn to prayer, to love our neighbors, to linger with and cherish the Word of God. So, we had the Spirit for a while, but then we lost it. We became preoccupied with many things and our love becomes half-hearted and lukewarm, which are miserable words in the Bible -- half-hearted and lukewarm.

What we want is that the Holy Spirit should come upon us and that we should seek it to stay -- not to fly off. Think of some autumn flock of ducks flying south for the winter. They take wing and fly off. We do not want the church to be so: that the Holy Spirit comes upon us at Baptism but then takes wing, as if a flock is flying away from New York City.

This is an old story. It is not just us modern people who find some corner of our hearts wandering away from the Lord. So have God's people throughout the ages. And so, we hear the lament of the Lord through the prophet Hosea concerning the inconstancy of the people's love:

⁴O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. (Hosea 6:4, KJV)

But the LORD's love is not like that. It does not dissipate like morning dew before the rising sun. Rather, the Lord loves whole-heartedly, with an everlasting love:

³The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an *everlasting* love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. (Jeremiah 31:3, KJV)

So it is with Jesus. At long last, there has arisen on this old earth of ours Someone who not only loved, but who loved continually, with no interlude of something else, who *only* loved. Yes, at long last there has arisen someone upon whom not only did the Spirit descend, but remain!

And so, it is natural to read in the story of Jesus that he loved “to the end”:

Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them *unto the end*.
(John 13:1, KJV)

And it is but another way of saying things to observe that Jesus did not sin:

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

For to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit remains, means that there is no room for cruelty, no room for betrayal, no room for sin in the soul.

So, that’s the first verse. The Spirit remained on Jesus.

Here is my second point: This Jesus who is constant in his love and on whom the Spirit remains is willing to have disciples, but he first asks them a question:

³⁸Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?”

Here Jesus asks for some clarity in our thinking. He asks for us to search our hearts as to why we would follow him.

His question here is akin to the question he asks the lame man lying near the pool in Jerusalem’s sheep market:

¹After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
²Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. ⁴For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.
⁵And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, *Wilt thou be made whole?*

Well, at first blush, it seems an unnecessary question. Why else would the man be there? He has waited thirty-eight years to be the first one to step into that pool that

he might be healed. But the questions of Jesus directed toward our soul are never unnecessary. “Would you be made well? It will mean forsaking your accustomed ways. It will be good, yet different. Wilt thou be made whole?” The city is full of people who faithfully go to their physician or their psychoanalyst, but are unwilling to do the work necessary. Do we really want to be well?

Likewise here. Two of John’s disciples follow Jesus. He turns to them and asks them a question, “What do you seek?” It is good that they become clear about this. If they seek wealth, there is little need to follow Jesus, for he is a poor man with nowhere to lay his head.¹ If they seek power, no need to follow Jesus, for he shall be executed by legitimate power. If they seek popularity, forsake Jesus now, for he is “despised and rejected”:

³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:3, KJV)

And err long, he will be mocked by the crowds even as his life ebbs on the cross.

Ahh, but if they seek goodness, then come to Jesus. The Spirit descends and remains on Jesus, which launches him onto a path of goodness henceforth. There is no other reason to follow Jesus than this: that you and I want also to become good.

Throughout John’s Gospel, the call to discipleship is phrased this way: Come and see. So it is that Jesus calls these two disciples of John the Baptist:

³⁸Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” (John 1:38-39, RSV)

So it is that Philip declines to argue with Nathanael about whether anything good can come out of Nazareth, but simply says to the man, Come and see:

⁴⁶And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. (John 1:46, KJV)

Likewise with the Samaritan woman at the well. She bids her neighbors come and see Jesus:

Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ? (John 4:29, KJV)

¹ And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20, KJV)

This seems to be the order of discipleship. This is how we come to faith. Someone we trust, as John the Baptist's disciples trusted him, urges us to follow Jesus, and we up and do so. And in the doing, we come to believe in him and to trust him. Faith is not a matter of first studying Jesus inside and out, high and low, and then making some judgment according to our pre-existing convictions about whether it is good to follow him. Faith is more a matter of following and seeing what he will make of us. So it was with the fisherman along the Sea of Galilee. Jesus gave them no lecture about himself. He simply bid them come and follow him. And in the following, the fishermen of fish became fishers of men. Indeed, they became saints.

And this leads me to my last verse.

It seems to me that what ails our world is that there is a scarcity of saints, a paucity of piety. Where is St. Paul among us? Where is St. Francis? Where is St. John Chrysostom, to name one of my favorites? He was bishop of Ephesus in Syria and then archbishop of Constantinople. Well, there are plenty of bishops and archbishops around in this day and age, but where is St. John Chrysostom. Where is St. Augustine?

And the fundamental problem here is that St. Paul is right: We are called to be *saints*. Or shift the emphasis to the start of the sentence: *We* are called to be saints.

The tools of the trade for a Christian are available to us. Meditation on sacred scripture, prayer, fellowship with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, mutual encouragement, the lives of the saints, and waiting patiently upon the Lord as did the Psalmist in today's Psalm:

¹I waited patiently up- | on the Lord;*

he stooped to me and | heard my cry.

²He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the | mire and clay;*

he set my feet upon a high cliff and made my | footing sure. (Psalm 40, LBW)

All of the resources of Christian spirituality are available to us, but they are of no help if we do not understand that our true goal in life is to be *Christ-like*, our holy ambition is to be saints. If we permit the world to teach us some lukewarm way of being a Christian, then it is as if we have permitted the Spirit to descend upon us in our baptisms, but then we let the Spirit take wing and fly away from us. The goal, you see, is not just that we should *be* inspired, but that we should *remain* inspired as did Jesus. Remaining with the Spirit: that is how we become mature Christians, and that is how we most help the world and bring glory to the name of Jesus, who deserves the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.