

**Prayer of Invitation** (*UMH Hymnal 335*)

O God, the Holy Spirit,

    Come to us, and among us;

    Come as the wind, and cleanse us;

    Come as the fire, and burn;

    Come as the dew, and refresh;

Convict, convert, and consecrate

    Many hearts and lives

    To our great good

    And to Your greater glory;

And this we ask in Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Isaiah 43:1-7**

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you,

O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

And the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my songs from far away and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

This is the Word of the Lord (**Thanks be to God**)

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in **bodily form like a dove** . And a voice came from heaven, “**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.**”

This is the Word of the Lord, (**Thanks be to God**)

**Acts 8:14-17**

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

This is the Word of the Lord, **(Thanks be to God)**

*Spirit Descending*

We come to this place week after week to worship the living God – we don’t understand everything about God, or who God is – but we do understand parts, as they are revealed in Holy Scripture.

From our interpretation of Scripture, we worship God as a *triune* God, meaning that the One we call God is – ONE God, made up of three distinct Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We don’t talk about the trinity very much because it’s confusing and complicated – I’m not going to get into the thick of it right now, I think I’ll leave that for Trinity Sunday – but I want to start with the Trinity to highlight the fact that although we worship God as a triune God, often our tradition emphasizes Father and Son – and skims over the Holy Spirit.

There are a lot of reasons for this – but I think the main reason is that we don’t really know what to do with the Holy Spirit. As good Methodists we’re not really into standing up and raising our hands – speaking in tongues and pointing to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst in those ways. It makes us uncomfortable – and unsure of what is “real” and what is a show.

A popular Christian writer and short film maker, Rob Bell, tells a story in one of his short *numa* videos (“numa” being the greek word for “spirit”). And he tells about a time he found himself in a worship service outside of his comfort zone. He tells his listeners that one day, when his wife was at work, he decided to go on a field trip with his four year old son. In this season of his life he was very interested in experiencing Christian worship traditions that were different than his own, and so he went to a service put on by a evangelical, very conservative men’s group at a local sports arena. He said that he went strictly as a critical observer. As the worship service began, there was a time of singing – and everyone was lifting their hands and shouting “Alleluia”. He says that he scoffed as he looked around, until he noticed that his four year old son was raising his hands and singing along. When his son realized that Rob was not participating, the boy looked up at him and said, “daddy, you’re supposed to raise your hands like this”. Rob concludes his story by sharing how that experience changed the way he understood the role of the Holy Spirit in worship – and how his experience of tradition had actually hindered him from having a robust understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a vital part of our understanding of *who* God is and *how* God works.

For the next three weeks we’re going to focus on the role of the Holy Spirit in three ways:

- 1) The role of the Holy Spirit as descending on persons or communities
- 2) The role of the Holy Spirit in binding communities together
- 3) The role of the Holy Spirit in sending us out to do the work of God.

Today we’ll stick with number one. The Holy Spirit *descending*.

Our scriptures for today all have something to do with *who* God is and *how* God works. They all involve *movement* and *power*. They all involve God’s *affirmation* of individuals and communities, and the power that comes with that affirmation (The movement of the Holy Spirit). There are so many wonderful things about the scriptures this morning, I could preach an entire sermon on all of them – but for our purposes today, I will blast through them – so we can pull out what is applicable for our discussion of the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The scripture from Isaiah does not distinguish the Persons of God – Father, Son, or Holy Spirit – what God says in this passage comes from all three – God as ONE. And in this passage from Isaiah, **we are reminded that God never stops moving**. God is always creating, protecting, sustaining, supporting, enabling – pulling God’s children close – *calling them by name*.

God says:

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

There is power in a name and naming. Think about your own name. Someone gave you that name – it’s a part of who you are. In most cases your parents gave it to you– and then called you by it. Sometimes we choose to shorten or change our names to express something ourselves –sometimes other people choose nicknames that for us. Sometimes we like the name , sometimes we don’t. But it has power, because your name is inextricably tied to who you are.

A huge pet peave of mine is when people forget my name – I spent a whole year in Germany with an English teacher who called me Colin. Seriously?!

Names are important – and being called by name means that whoever is doing the calling knows who you are and thinks you are important.

### **God calls us by name.**

So that’s the first part of the puzzle: When the God as the Holy Spirit *moves* within us – or moves within our community- it’s not a random general movement. It is specific to us – *specific* to you as created by God for a *specific* purpose with *specific* gifts – *specific* to all of us coming together as a community, pooling our *specific* gifts to do *specific* things God sets before us. Forgive my over-use of **specific!** But do you get what I mean? You are not just one of the crowd – we are not just another church doing “stuff”. God created you and calls you by name. God created *this* community, and a place for you in it.

Our second scripture is our gospel reading – and it tells the story of Jesus’ baptism. **This scripture tells us the importance and power of affirmation in self-realization and fully living into who we are created to be.**

It wasn’t until Jesus’ baptism that God formally affirmed Jesus’ identity and gave him the power to use his gifts and fulfill the purpose for which he was created. (begotten, created, whatever ☺) There is no question in our minds about whether or not Jesus, as he existed in space and time – had a specific purpose or specific gifts for ministry. That’s almost ridiculous to even say. We don’t know what sort of understanding Jesus had regarding his identity previous to his baptism – we know that Mary knew Jesus’ identity, and that Jesus had some understanding of who he was – but it wasn’t until he received concrete affirmation of his identity and calling, and was given the power of Holy Spirit in a way that he could receive – that he could truly become Jesus the Messiah and begin his ministry – and slow march toward the cross.

*Even Jesus* needed affirmation of his identity in God – and with that affirmation came the descent of the Holy Spirit, enabling him to fully realize his identity and use his gifts in ministry.

Even Jesus.

**So that’s the second piece for our puzzle: The Holy Spirit descending on a person in a way that they can receive is tied to affirmation of their identity in God, their specific calling and gifts for ministry.**

So far we’ve talked about

**God:** that God never stops moving and calling us by name

**Individuals:** how God affirms the identity of individuals and gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable them to fully become who they are created to be

**So now we move to talk about communities:** How God uses leaders to affirm the identity and call of communities, and how that affirmation leads to a fresh acceptance of the Holy Spirit in the life of that community.

Our third Scripture lesson comes from Acts – and tells about the conversion of a community of people in Samaria. Remember that we’re talking about Samaria as in – the “good Samaritan”. They were a group of people that were Jewish, but shunned by the main stream Jewish population because they were understood to be ethnically impure – and they did not worship in the temple in Jerusalem. They worshiped somewhere else. Before the coming of Christ, they understood themselves to be “the people of God” – but were unsure of their “status” before God because of their lower, shunned status in the eyes of mainstream Jewish tradition.

So here in Acts, we learn that some of the people in Samaria became followers of Christ under the leadership of a man named Phillip. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and subsequently became a community



of faith. When Peter and John (you know, two of the original disciples) heard about this, they came to Samaria to help Phillip. They came to Samaria, to the people traditionally shunned by Jewish tradition – and affirmed their identity as children of God and affirmed their calling to be a community of faith following Jesus. In their coming to Samaria, the leadership of Phillip, Peter, and John affirmed the community’s identity and calling. The result from this affirmation was that the power of the Holy Spirit descended on the community, and enabled them to fully live into their identity in God and use their gifts for ministry.

So now it’s time to wrap it up and bring it home.

Each and every one of us is created by God and called by name.

In order to affirm each other in our identity in God and calling in ministry – we need to be the mouthpiece of God. We need to be the medium through which the Holy Spirit moves and descends on other people.

It can be as simple as reminding a brother or sister that they are a child of God. Especially in tough times.

It can be as easy as expressing to a brother or sister that you can see that they are gifted in this area or that area – and that you see God working through them.

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Oneida First United Methodist Church  
“Spirit Descending”

God is always moving and always working – the Holy Spirit descends on us enabling us to fully live into the people we were created to be – and to use the gifts that we’ve already been given.

Come Holy Spirit, Come. Descend on us. Transform us to be the people we were created to be.

Amen.