

For Pentecost Sunday, we were having a number of opportunities with the service. So, I did not write a sermon this week. Instead, I preached more conversationally. This is a sermon that I used for my inspiration. It was written by Pastor Orrey McFarland.

For Pentecost Sunday we have two texts that are different in focus but equally appropriate for declaring the good news of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost and Paul's proclamation

First, it may be helpful to narrate from Acts 2.1-4 the outpouring of the Spirit on the diverse peoples gathered for Pentecost. The central emphasis of the text is that, despite the diversity of languages, all heard "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11 ESV).

Second, in the longer reading from Romans we hear that this same Spirit is given to us. The text answers a question that many of us might ask: how do we understand our hope — we've been given God's Spirit and so claimed as God's children — when life seems more defined by suffering than the promised glory of the future?

The text divides into three parts, any of which could be the focus for a sermon — or all three could be held together.

Present sufferings and the down-payment of future glory (Romans 8:18-25)

Paul begins by addressing the discrepancy between the present experience of believers (suffering) and the promised future (glory). The suffering believer is set within a broken cosmic context also awaiting redemption (see also verse 22 with its echoes of Genesis 3). Paul explains that we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons" (8:24). But how do we understand that we are *waiting* for our adoption, when Paul has just said that the "Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:16; see verse 15)?

The Spirit has a dual function here: the Spirit anchors the believer in God's promises amidst the chaos of the present brokenness of the world; and the Spirit draws the believer into the certainty of God's future. That is, the Spirit is God's future given to the believer in the present — and the Spirit will not leave the believer there. As Paul says, in a rare formulation, "in this hope we *were* saved" (8:24). We have received God's Spirit and claimed as God's children, fellow heirs with Christ (as such, this week's sermon can easily be related to the previous week's text on the new life of baptism, see Romans 6:1-14). The Spirit directs us to the fullness of that promise and the future finalization of our adoption.

Paul's description of believers as those who have "the first-fruits of the Spirit" is important (8:23). The Israelites were meant to offer God their "first-fruits" — the first and best of the fruits of their labor (see Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 18:4). But 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 more clearly explains the logic here. Paul says that because Christ has been raised from the dead as "the first-fruits" of the resurrection, so *then* will all believers be raised. Likewise, because believers have "the first-fruits of the Spirit," they can *therefore* be confident that God's "down payment" of the Spirit is the guarantee of the promised future (see also 2 Corinthians 5:5; Ephesians 1:14). The next section specifies one way that the Spirit works during this time of waiting.

Our Weakness and the Spirit's Prayer (verses 26-30)

Paul reassures the reader that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (8:26); that is, the Spirit isn't inertly present as God's down payment, but is active in the believer. Indeed, here Paul describes how the Spirit prays on behalf of believers who "do not know what to pray for as we ought" (8:26).

Note that Paul does not say that the Spirit gives us the words to say, illuminates our minds, or even teaches us what to pray. Rather, the Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (8:26). In the midst of suffering and weakness, the believer can have confidence that there is one who prays perfectly *for us*, one who knows the will of God and is perfectly known by God (8:27).

The Spirit's work, which stands the believer upright in the midst of a crumbling world, is the way that God draws us into his promises: from foreknowledge to glorification, the certainty of God's love for his people is, for Paul, unquestionable (8:28-30).

What then shall we say? (verses 31-39)

The final section begins with questions to which Paul knows the answers: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:31). Paul is driving home the good news that "nothing can separate us" from God's love, because of God's own giving of his Son for us and the pouring out of his Spirit on us. Indeed, it is God himself who works *all* things together for our good (see 8:28).

In parallel logic to the first-fruits, Paul declares that because God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all," he will "with him graciously give us all things" (8:32). That is, although the present state of believers is suffering and groaning — whether because of distress, persecution, famine, etc. (8:35) — Paul says that there is nothing in this broken world, neither "things *present* nor *things to come*," that can separate believers from God's love (8:38-39).

God's Christ-shaped love that has poured into our hearts through the Spirit (5:5) overcomes all obstacles, and the Spirit enlivens the heart in faith to trust that, truly, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (8:18).