

Positioning and Preparing for the Spirit

Ephesians 4: 1-3 Acts 1:4 and 12-26

Frederick Buechner, once defined magic as one of the oldest human attempts at manufacturing security for ourselves. Magic, he wrote, is saying *Abra-cad-abra* and pulling the rabbit out of the hat or installing a dashboard Jesus to prevent smash-ups. Magic is going to church so you will get to heaven and using Listerine so everybody will love you. Magic is the technique of controlling unseen powers and will always work if you do it by the book. Magic is manipulation and says, *My will be done*. Religion, [on the other hand], Buechner advises, is propitiation [that is, surrendering] and says *Thy will be done*.

So on this Halloween morning when much of the world focuses on things haunted but not holy, on things superstitious but not truly supernatural, on things magical yet not on what is the most wonderful mystery, let me offer a lament. My lament is that too often you and I go about the practices of our religion more as if it were a matter of magic and manipulation than of faith and trust. That is, often we act as if spiritual growth and maturity is the direct result of doing certain acceptable Christian behaviours. Magic! If you want to grow, then all you need to do is read your Bible, go to church, meet with other Christians, tithe, witness and spend time in prayer, and if you do, you'll change and all the difficult people around you will change and your challenging situations will be transformed and your life will be wonderful. Magic! I remember years ago watching a prosperity gospel preacher tell the watching audience to place their hands on their television sets and pray and God would provide them that new car they were desiring. Magic! Or if you read Rhonda Byrne's books *The Secret* and now *The Power*, you will discover that all it takes to change your relationships,

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money, health, happiness, career, and your entire life, besides buying her books, is by wishing for them and pretending they are already in your possession. Magic!

While we might dismiss people like Byrnes as shameless profiteers ready to take advantage of the world's deep hunger for hope, sadly, we can ourselves get caught up in treating faith as magic, or as formula, or as a matter of doing right things for God in the right way so as to get some reward from God.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that reading the Bible, prayer, fellowship, worship and all the other practices of our faith are unimportant. What is so misleading and unhelpful is when we reduce faith to a checklist of activities or believe that by themselves, those practices are going to make us become more like Jesus. As one writer put it, such a notion leads either to self-righteousness and legalism on one hand, or exhaustion and discouragement on the other.

Robert Mulholland has helpfully defined spiritual formation as the process of being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ for the sake of others. At the heart of that definition is the assertion that it is a *process of being conformed*, not one of conforming. How often we are tempted to reduce God to a slot-machine deity who will give out the desired blessings and goodies if we just deposit the right change of prayer and piety, good works and well-meaning endeavour.

Friends, God alone has the power to change us into the image of Jesus. Paul told the Romans that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, and I need you to know we have all fallen so short of the beauty and holiness of Jesus that nothing short of a miracle of grace can transform our lives to be a living resemblance of him who died for us. There is no way we can do heart surgery on ourselves, transplanting our heart of stone with one of flesh. All our striving, performing and working hard at spirituality doesn't do a thing – it would be like trying to bail out the Pacific Ocean with a teaspoon. If we think that any of our

efforts can save us or sanctify us, we're playing at magic. Only by grace are we saved.

Again, that is not to say the practices of faith are of no significance, or that we have no responsibility in the whole process of our being redeemed and made to be holy. I have used the term "positioning" in other teaching times and I want to come back to that phrase yet again, and use also the word, "surrendering." Our work in this process of being conformed is all about positioning and surrendering. Let me repeat the story of the old rabbi who taught his students that prayer was quite useless and that grace from God fell from heaven almost as if by accident. When asked why then he insisted that his students spend so much time in prayer, he answered, "to make you as accident prone as possible."

As we pray, study scripture, worship, fellowship, meditate or gather at the Table, we make ourselves accident prone for grace, accident prone for the Lord's transforming touch. We actively position ourselves before God so as to be receptive and responsive to what God wants to do in us and with us. I read scripture not because reading scripture is going to change me. Atheists can read scripture. I read the Bible because God has been known to show up and speak through scripture into my life, and when God speaks, I change. When I pray, it is not the fervency of my praying that brings about transformation – I might sweat with the effort and get sore knees from the kneeling, but it is in the midst of my calling to and waiting on God that God just might show up, and when he does, transformation happens. The same is true of any other spiritual discipline – not magic but positioning ourselves before God and surrendering ourselves to God and how he chooses, in mercy and love, to act in our hearts.

Now why do I go over all this material again? For two reasons. First, I am convinced that it is the simplest realities that we have the hardest time remembering and believing. How

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many times have we heard preachers say that God loves us unconditionally – how many times have you heard me tell you of the Lord's extravagant, lavish mercy towards you – yet in our heart of hearts, we either refuse to believe that God could ever actually love us, or believe that God could only love us if we somehow shape up, smarten up, clean up or otherwise measure up to some impossible-to-attain level of goodness? Friends, hear the good news: the Almighty God loves you, beyond all measure, beyond all imagining, beyond all deserving, beyond all performing. There's no magic, only mystery. There's no earning to be done, only receiving and rejoicing.

Secondly, in this series about inviting the Holy Spirit to enter and move more fully in our lives, how much more it needs to be said that we can no more command or bribe the Spirit to give some astounding zap to our spiritual batteries than we can make ourselves look more like Jesus just by showing up to more worship services. What is ours to do is to position ourselves where God is known to show up with blessing and to wait eagerly and humbly, expectantly and receptively, for the gift of the Spirit which Jesus assured us that the Father has promised to give us.

But if positioning is what you and I do as individuals, let me suggest that there is a corresponding responsibility which belongs to us corporately as a congregation, and that is preparation. Again, it is not a matter of magic or manipulation in which we subtly try to control God; rather it is the intentional preparation of ourselves, as a people, to be as accident prone as possible, as grace-responsive as possible and as Spirit-welcoming as possible.

Now let me add a notwithstanding comment if I may. When we read the Acts of the Apostles, we might well ask the question, how in the world could those first disciples ever prepare themselves for such an incredible outpouring as happened on the day of Pentecost? Notwithstanding the

prophecy in Joel about dreaming dreams and seeing visions, or in other scriptures of the Old Testament wherein the Spirit moved in power, the disciples really had no way of knowing what was going to come. How does one prepare for a violent rushing wind erupting inside a building? Who would have guessed that tongues of fire were going to dance on their heads or that their own human tongues would be given words of praise in a multitude of languages and that a fisherman's tongue would preach a sermon that would bring the conversion of three thousand people?

Yet at the same time, the disciples did, in a very real way, prepare themselves for the gift that they were to receive, and in the story read in Acts 1 this morning, we see at least five of the powerfully significant ways by which they readied themselves for the promised gift. Those ways are just as relevant for us. Let me name them very briefly: gathering together, unifying, putting things in order, remaining faithful at doing what they knew to do, and most importantly, praying. Let me focus on just the first two of those ways of preparing this morning; the others we will explore in the weeks ahead.

First, Jesus' disciples gathered together. Luke says that after Jesus' ascension to heaven, the eleven returned to Jerusalem, and he names them for us: Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James, son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James. There was also a number of women, Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers. There, in Jerusalem, as they waited, other believers gathered with them, a group, Luke says, that numbered about one hundred and twenty in all, crammed and stuffed together in that upper room.

One writer said that what is most evident is that "Together is very important to the Christian life." For three years, the disciples had been together with Jesus, sharing life, hope, joy, sorrow. Jesus had promised that where two or three of them

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would come together, he would be with them. And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews would warn about the dangers of failing to meet together. The meaning of the Greek word, *ecclesia*, from which our word, church derives, means the called out and called together ones.

Whenever we gather together, we welcome the presence of our living Saviour in our midst. The Christian life was never meant to be a solo affair, and the church was never meant to be a building where people gather as strangers and leave just as alone and lonely as they came. The Christian life was ordained by God to be an adventure and journey that is shared together, out of a common and contagious love for Jesus and with a commitment to live out his dynamic, daring love in our relationships with each other. If we desire God's transforming grace to be at work in and through St. Andrew's so that it truly is a place where the Lord is honoured, where hurting and wounded people can find healing and hope, and where the Spirit is tangibly present in power, then it will be as we gather faithfully and eagerly together in worship and in ministry, in fellowship and in prayer, in the fullness of the congregation and in small groups for study and prayer. While you and I may indeed experience visitation from the Holy Spirit in the midst of our times of private devotion and in the midst of the ordinariness of every day living, where has God most regularly provided that lavish outpouring of his Spirit? It is upon the Body of his people, gathered together, to love and serve the Master and to love and bless one another. Where two or three gather, the Lord comes.

They not only gathered, Luke tells us. They unified. The phrase in the fourteenth verse of Acts chapter one flows from one of those fifty cent Greek words that takes a whole lot of explaining to translate properly. *Homothumadon* is the word, and it is used twelve different times within Acts. It means a combination of "rushing ahead together," "of one accord," "of one mind and purpose," and "all joined together."

You see, the believers were not just crammed together in that upper room, they were bound together with a singleness of purpose. They were waiting for the gift of the Spirit with one accord, as they shared meals, shared life, shared in prayer.

What is so amazing, however, is that in fact, they were an incredibly diverse lot – a motley crew with different backgrounds, temperaments and a range of experiences with Jesus. There was at least one Zealot, Simon, who hated the Romans with such passion that he was involved in violent opposition – he was essentially a terrorist. Simon was in the group together with Matthew, the tax collector, whose life prior to following Jesus was acting as a collaborator with the Romans. Talk about a conflict of backgrounds, yet here they were, side by side, shoulder by shoulder, unified in praying for God's gift of the Spirit.

In that crammed upper room, we could have found a woman with a past full of sexual sin and at the same time there was at least one or two Pharisees, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, whose religious and moral scruples were extreme. There were those who had followed Jesus from the beginning as well as those who had gathered more recently, believing firmly that he had risen. There were those who, ostensibly Jews, had more than a little suspicious Greek background. There were along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, a whole mob of women like Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, who once would have had no place in affairs of public religion but now were in the very centre of the group.

What they were, in truth, was the church as it was meant to be – a diverse, mixed bag of people whose hope and joy was in knowing the grace of God given in Jesus, and desiring to share that together as one interdependent body, one people of grace, one family of blessing.

I have emphasized often that there are more than fifty different "one another" phrases in the New Testament – honour

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one another, encourage one another, forgive one another, be at peace with one another, accept one another, and most central to them all, love one another. These are not mild suggestions or optional possibilities for the Christian life: they are commands from Christ signifying that our worship and service to him involves not just a getting together here and there, but a deep unity, a learning and choosing to be of one accord, and a settling down with one mind and purpose to be about the things that Jesus wants us to be about.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warned against grieving the Spirit, which more than anything else, represents the failure to be of one mind, one heart. We grieve the Spirit when there are unresolved angers or bitternesses that divide us. We grieve the Spirit when there is any sense of some being more valued or valuable than others, or when we dismiss any one because they are young or old, too liberal or too conservative in their views, too restrained or too exuberant in their worship, or because of any other judgment we might render by which to demean them or exalt ourselves. We grieve the Spirit when we fail to look upon every one whom God has gathered into our midst as anything less than the most precious of souls for whom Jesus gave his very life and without whom the party would not be complete.

Homothumadon. Of one mind, of one accord, all bound together with one purpose and joy. If we desire more of God's blessing and long to become more of God's blessing; if we as a church family yearn to be that people in and through whom the Lord does fresh miracles and healings, fresh signs and wonders by which to startle and encourage the watching world; if we long to be a people of power whose witness is used to save souls even to the thousands; if we want to be the people of the Presence with and in whom the Holy Spirit dwells in might and mystery, we prepare ourselves for such gifting and empowering

as we gather together and work to be of one mind and one heart, for the glory of God.

Positioning. Surrendering. Preparing. Not magic, but the work of the Christian life by which we make ourselves available, expectant and responsive for the outpouring of the Spirit and our service to the Kingdom.

Let us pray:

Draw us together, Holy Lord, and make us truly one with Christ, and he with us. Where division of any kind might exist, reveal and convict of our brokenness and sin. Forgive, heal and reconcile us to you and to one another. Where indifference of arrogance would separate, or fear and despair would alienate, cleanse with saving grace and restore the joy of our salvation. In every way, Lord, renew and bless and prepare us that we may indeed be that fit dwelling and temple for your own Holy Spirit, for whose presence we cry out asking, more, Lord, more. Come Spirit, come. For Jesus' sake. Amen