

John 20:19-23 (TNIV)

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

2 Corinthians 5:14-17 (NRSV)

¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Who are we? Really. God has given us an identity, but the world tells us lies about who we are. We even tell lies to ourselves. In this series, we'll talk about our true identities and strengthen our ability to fend off the identity thieves.

If I were to ask many Christians to name the three “big” days in the Christian year, nearly all could come up with Christmas and Easter. After all, that’s when the church is packed with people, many of whom are affectionately known as “Holly and Lily” Christians.

But I doubt that many could come up with the third big day: Pentecost. Yet for the next six months, every Sunday on the Christian calendar is known simply as the latest Sunday “after Pentecost.”

I think I know why Pentecost gets such scant notice. First, we hardly know what to make of the Holy Spirit. We read in John’s Gospel that Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” but we are a little mystified by the whole thing. The same is true for Luke’s story of the Spirit’s arrival at Pentecost (Acts 2). With our heads and voices we acknowledge that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: three persons, one God. But what does it really mean?

For some of us most of the time and for most of us some of the time, it can be difficult to think of the Holy Spirit as a person. We generally use the word “spirit” in impersonal ways. Our images of the Holy Spirit – a dove, wind, fire – are all impersonal. So, we have to retrain ourselves to refer to and think of the Holy Spirit as a person, the very personal presence of God with us.

Never . . . not once . . . in the Bible is the Holy Spirit referred to using the impersonal pronoun “it.” Rather, the Holy Spirit is always a “who,” referred to using personal pronouns. At various times, the Holy Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens*, and is *lied to!* These words and phrases describe what persons do, not inanimate objects or impersonal forces. Perhaps it will help if we remember this: Paul uses the title “Holy Spirit” as often as he uses “Lord Jesus Christ”!

With the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus' followers are remade, re-created, made new. It is as Jesus tells Nicodemus when the Pharisee comes to see him in the night: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit. . . . You must be born from above" (John 3:6-7). It is as Paul tells the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This is not about a conversion experience or even one's personal transformation, it is about God's redemption and remaking of the cosmos and, consequently, the remaking of each of us. As Richard Hays notes in his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, the age of sin and death is passing away, "the new age has appeared in Christ," and the community of believers "stands at the juncture of the two." When Paul writes that the believers are the ones "upon whom the ends of the ages have met" he means just that. (See the p. 3 text box.)

It is in Paul's letters that we most clearly see the relationship of Easter and Pentecost, resurrection and Spirit. Paul refers to the resurrected Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the "first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23). "First fruits" is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning

The Festival of Pentecost

There are three major festivals in the Old Testament: Passover in early spring, Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks) in late spring, and Tabernacles (or Booths) in early fall. All Jewish men were expected to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem for all three festivals each year.

Jesus was crucified at the end of Passover, the festival commemorating the Jews' release from bondage in Egypt. Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival to show gratitude for the first fruits of the wheat harvest and was celebrated fifty days after Passover. Over time, Pentecost lost its agricultural connection but was still about "first fruits" in Jesus' day. Later, Pentecost transformed into an observance of gratitude for the Law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai fifty days after Passover.

The Book of Acts tells how, not long after Jesus' ascension to the Father, Jesus' disciples were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. It is a big festival and the city was packed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. There, as Jesus promised, God's Spirit came upon the disciples, creating them anew and empowering them to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

of the harvest. Both Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God's kingdom, which has arrived already but has "not yet" been consummated. The harvest has begun but it is not yet completed.

Like Jesus' resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God's new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul's own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's work had come to its climax. And it is in this that we find our true identity: God's people.

New covenant people

When Moses and the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai after their exodus from Egypt, God formed them into a people defined by and bound to a covenant. As the vanguard of God's redemptive work, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

Despite the people's inability to live up to the covenant, they remained God's covenant people. God would remain faithful to them even when God had every reason to abandon them and start over.

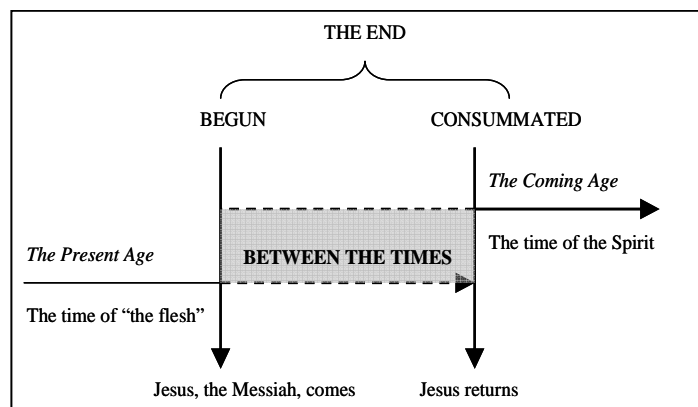
God's covenant faithfulness was demonstrated for all the world to see, though most would not, on a cross outside Jerusalem. Though we

refer to the parts of our Bibles as the Old and New Testaments (Covenants), the new covenant focused upon faith in Jesus Christ was not a replacement for the "old" Mosaic covenant, but its fulfillment.

God had a people then; God has a people now. One God. One people. God was present with his people then. God is present with us now. Not in the same way, but present.

It is in our covenantal relationship with God that we find our true identity. This identity, that of God's covenant people, his children and heirs, is not something we create nor is it something that the world can take away. Granted, we often (usually? always?) fail to live as God's new creations; our "habits and practices" fall woefully short of God's glorious standard. Yet, we remain God's people. It is here, with God and among God's people that each of us learns who we really are.

The Christians' New Perspective: *already/not yet*



(figure from Gordon Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

The Jews of Jesus' day awaited the arrival of the Messiah who would usher in the kingdom of God (the new age). But after Jesus' resurrection, there was still sickness and death and sin. Thus, the truth of Jesus' resurrection and his claim to be Messiah forced the Christians to rethink the nature of the new age's arrival.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's victory over sin and death had been won. Yes, the kingdom, the new age, had come – but *not yet* in all its fullness. The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come *already*, but *not yet*. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 27 – JUNE 2

Sunday, Job 1:1-12 In the opening scene, the reader learns what Job and his friends never do: why the terrible things befall Job. What portrait of Job is painted for us in v. 1-5? What is Satan's job in heaven? Why do you think Satan would want to make a wager with God? Why do you think God would agree with Satan's plan?

Monday, Job 1:13 – 2:10 How bad does it get for Job? Why do you think God lets Satan attack Job's health? What is the response of Job's wife to all this? What would yours be?

Tuesday, Job 2:11 – 3:19 What is the best thing that Job's three friends do when they arrive? What is Job's outlook when his friends arrive? Have you ever experienced anything close to the despair that Job describes?

Wednesday, Job 4:1-11 When Job's friend breaks his silence, what is his explanation for Job's suffering? Why do you think Eliphaz is convinced that Job must have sinned? This sets the stage for the friends' attempts at explanation after explanation.

Thursday, Job 19 Here, Job expresses soaring hope (v. 25-27) in the midst of his sorrow. What is the source of that hope? Do you see in v. 25-27 any hints of Jesus and a future resurrection?

Friday, Job 38: 40:1-9 Finally, God arrives. How would you summarize God's speech to Job? What is Job's first response? And God's? Look over this whole section. Does Job ever get the answers he seeks? What do you do when you don't get the answers you think you deserve? What does this book have to say about why bad things happen to good people?

Saturday, Job 42 In the end, Job is humbled and satisfied. He trusted God when he had it all and he trusts God still. What of Job's friends? Why must Job offer a sacrifice on his friends behalf? Why does God restore Job's fortunes? What is meant by the doubling? Can new children really make up for the loss of Job's first children? Spend a few minutes looking back over this remarkable story. What did you learn about God and the problem of evil?

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Gordon Fee, a leading NT scholar, wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church, as he once was, he "would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church's understanding of itself as an eschatological¹ community." Why do you think that Dr. Fee would say such a thing? Why is this "between the times"/"new creation"/"already/not yet" business so important?

How might understanding ourselves as an eschatological community change us -- our lives, our priorities -- even our congregation? Why is this essential to grasping our true identity, as individuals and as a community of faith?

Understanding Jesus as a person is easy for us. Understanding the Father as a person is usually pretty easy, even if we end up visualizing an old guy with a beard who looks a lot like Morgan Freeman, at least if we've seen *Bruce Almighty*. (Of course, we shouldn't try to visualize the Father, but I suspect that many of us can't help it from time to time.) But the Holy Spirit is a different matter. I find that many Christians have great difficulty thinking of the Holy Spirit as a person. Do you agree? Why might this be so? What are some concrete steps we can take to help us relate to God's Spirit as a person, not some impersonal force?

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives. Even in our prayers, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, expressing to God what we cannot (Romans 8:26-27). Yet, for many of us, God's Spirit is relegated to no more than a still, small voice, robbed of any real power. When do you most see or feel the Spirit at work in our congregation? How can we go about fostering a life of the Spirit at St. Andrew? How can we foster a life of the Spirit in our individual Christian walk? We've spent a lot of time this year talking about the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, bible study, and meditation . . . about training not merely trying. How can these disciplines help us to foster a life of the Spirit and embrace our true identity?

¹ *Eschatology* is from the Greek word, *eschaton*, meaning "last things," and has to do with the end-times. The figure in the text box is an eschatological framework depicting a view of the end times.