

Living by the Spirit

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[0:00] And we invite everyone to be seated. Good morning, welcome. I'm Thomas. I'm the rector here at Church of the Advent. And if you're new, some of you are new, joining us for the first time.

This is a really great time to be here visiting, exploring Church of the Advent because we're taking time right now to remind ourselves who we are, why we're here, what we're aiming at as a community, and some of the values that are most important to us.

So this week is the second week in that. If you look at our bulletin, all of the topics we're covering are printed on the front page. This week we're asking a really particular question.

It's a very personal question for us as a church. What does it mean to live by the Holy Spirit? What does it mean when Christians use this phrase, living by the Spirit?

If you're not a church-going type person, if you're not a Christian, this might sound like a bizarre kind of question. Living by the Spirit, what does that mean?

[1:07] If you're not somebody who sort of knows the lingo, I understand it might sound strange. There's also a lot of Christians who, depending on our background or how long we've been in church, have different associations when it comes to a question like this.

So really any time we reference the Holy Spirit, by that I mean the third member of the Trinity, the God we believe in, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some of us come from a more purely intellectual background or grew up in churches where this wasn't emphasized. So on the one hand, what we're going to see this morning is that the church is not just a social club or a social service organization.

And we're not just here to do a few rituals and to hear an inspirational talk. That this is a place where we come expecting to encounter something, someone.

When we gather here, we expect to encounter God. So on the one hand, Christianity is more than just a set of beliefs and practices.

[2:14] It hinges on our experience of God. And I would go so far as to say, if that is missing from our life as Christians, then something very crucial and central is missing.

On the other hand, experiencing God doesn't always mean miraculous signs and wonders, the things that people often think of.

Most often, the Holy Spirit is at work in very subtle ways, through very ordinary means that we may not even be aware of. Over the last couple of years, if you've been a part of our church and been on the journey that we've been on, you know that the Holy Spirit has worked in very powerful and very subtle ways, but undeniably so, in ways that have inspired us to actually spend time on this right now.

Part of what we're doing is making sense of what we've seen and heard and experienced ourselves. So we're going to be leaning into that in the months and years to come. What does it look like to do this well?

So we're going to be looking at Ephesians chapter 5, verses 15 to 21. What does it mean to live by the Spirit? We're going to look at the text and what it means, and then we'll ask a few questions about what it means for us.

[3:29] Please join me. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the fact that it's not merely ink on paper. We thank you that when we open these words, because of your Holy Spirit, these words come to life.

Lord, through them you speak to us. Lord, I pray in us that we would have open and receptive hearts. I pray that you would do your work through your word, and that because of your Spirit, as we open your written word, we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray this morning. Amen. So I want to look a little bit at Ephesians 5, verses 15 to 21, and you can turn to that in the Pew Bible if you'd like, or you can just follow along with me.

Throughout his letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses various metaphors to talk about Christian conversion, the process of going from a non-Christian to a Christian.

So in some places he says it's like being dead and then coming to life again, Ephesians chapter 2. He also says that it's like being in darkness and then coming into the light, moving from darkness to light.

[4:43] Just before our passage, he says it's like being asleep and then waking up. And he quotes an old hymn, a hymn that was old and known in the time that he's writing.

And the hymn says, Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Now this image is really helpful for us because, and maybe some of you can relate to this, many, many people go through their lives spiritually asleep.

Get up, go to work, spend money, go out and have fun on the weekends, date, marry, have kids, raise kids, retire. Without ever wondering, how did I get here?

What is my purpose? Is there anything more to life? Where am I going? And what's going to happen after I die one day? Some people go through their lives never even asking those questions.

They're not concerned with those things at all. There's no spiritual curiosity. They don't feel a longing or desire to connect with anything bigger than themselves. This isn't a lack of intelligence.

[5:58] It's not about where you grew up or who raised you or what culture you were a part of. And it has nothing to do with the lack of education or exposure to various ways of living in the world.

It simply means that people are spiritually asleep. That part of them is dormant. But then the Holy Spirit begins to work in some people.

And you begin to stir. You begin to become curious. And so for some people, this simply begins with a basic curiosity. Where did I come from?

What is all this for? Or it can come with a sense that something is missing. You know, I did all the things that the life script told me I was supposed to do.

I went to school and got good grades. I went to college and got good grades. Maybe I went to grad school and got good grades. I got an internship and a fellowship and a residency. And now I have a family and I have kids and I have a job.

[6:58] And I've done all the things that the life script tells me I'm supposed to do. And I'm at this place in my 30s or 40s where it feels like I have it all and I should feel satisfied. But I'm not.

I still feel empty. And I'm married, but I still feel lonely. And what's that all about? Something's missing. For me, I grew up, some of you know my story, I grew up going to church, but none of it mattered at all to me.

Completely irrelevant to my life. As a teenager, growing up in the 90s, I didn't care about any of it. And then around age 22, it just started to matter more.

And I can't tell you why. There was no one thing that happened. I just started to care more. I felt this openness inside me and this desire that I was embarrassed to admit that I wanted to know more about Jesus and who Jesus really was.

And then for the first time, really, that I could remember when my Christian friends, I had a few Christian friends where I went to school, when they started to talk about their faith, I wouldn't cringe and try to get away like I always would have done.

[8:02] I actually wanted to listen. I wanted to ask questions. I wanted to know. And I was hungry to know more. And only later did I realize that this was the Holy Spirit working inside me to wake me up.

I didn't, I wasn't aware of that at the time. I didn't even know what that meant. And ultimately, as Paul says, it was the Holy Spirit working in me so that the light of Christ could shine into my life so that I could come to faith in Him.

But at the time, it just felt like looking around and thinking, there's got to be more. But the process of spiritually waking up doesn't always happen all at once.

And many of you know this from your own experiences. It's not like you're sitting there one day and then, bam, all of a sudden, you're awake, the lights come on. Right? For some people, that's the case. But even the most powerful conversion experiences in the Bible, like what we call the Damascus Road experience, the Apostle Paul, this is a different sermon, people think of that as a

sudden conversion.

I would say absolutely not. In one place, Jesus says to him, why are you kicking against the goads? And what he means by that is, I've been working in your life for a long time. Why are you resisting me?

[9:15] And this is what we come to. The process of spiritually waking up doesn't necessarily happen all at once. And you know, this is where the parallel to sleep is really helpful.

Sleep studies, I've historically had trouble sleeping, and so I read a lot about sleep studies. And sleep studies show that the process of awakening actually involves two levels of awareness. You can be awake enough to be conscious, but not necessarily alert and aware. And those are the times when you're conscious enough to want to hit the snooze button, but you're not alert enough to realize that you're already late for work.

Right? There's this sort of in-between time where you're not sufficiently aware of your surroundings. And I have found that the same can be true spiritually. Listen to how St. Augustine talks about his own conversion in his confessions.

It's a little snippet from the confessions, and I'm going to give it to you in a kind of more modern version of English just to make it easier to understand. He says, he's writing this, the weight of my worldly attachments felt strangely comfortable, like the heaviness of sleep.

[10:24] When I thought about you, and he's talking to God, when I thought about you, I was like someone trying to wake up, but repeatedly drifting back to sleep. Nobody wants to sleep forever.

We know we need to get up, yet when we feel heavy and drowsy, we keep putting it off. Even when we know it's time to rise, we give in to the pleasure of staying asleep.

And Augustine says, that's how I felt. I knew it was much better to surrender to your love than to follow my selfish desires. You showed me in every way that your words were true.

I knew you were right, but all I could offer were the sleepy replies. Soon, yeah, soon, just give me a little longer.

He's writing this centuries ago, but how many can relate to that? I read those words, and I think about so many times in my life when that's exactly how I felt in my relationship with God.

[11:25] I think we all know that feeling. And we certainly know it physically. You know, you're in bed, the alarm goes off, you know you need to get up, but the bed feels so warm, and you're like five more minutes, and so you keep hitting the snooze button.

If you were here last night for the dance that we had, which was awesome, by the way, we had so much fun. You know, I think partly because of that, that's how I felt this morning. I was like, I know I need to get up, but I'm so tired.

So in verses 15 through 17 of Ephesians chapter 5, Paul is talking to Christians who are just now waking up because of the Holy Spirit. So that's the context for him to say, be very careful then how you live, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.

We need to be sufficiently aware of our surroundings. Therefore, he says, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. He's really addressing Christians who are awake, but they refuse to get out of bed.

Right? And he's like, you need to wake up. The Holy Spirit has given you consciousness. There's something alive inside you now. Now it's time to get up and start living.

[12:39] You're in a kind of half-life. And you need to get out of bed. You need to seek the Lord's will for your life. So, you know, if Paul had the language for it, he would probably say something like, stop hitting the spiritual snooze button in your life.

But then Paul keeps going. He says in verse 18, do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And the way we need to understand that is that the Christian life is about more than just waking up. That is just the beginning. That is just the beginning.

The Christian life, friends, is an invitation into fullness. Jesus says, I came that they might have life and have it abundantly, have it in abundance.

It's an invitation to fullness. The Christian life is an invitation to share in the life of God so much that it touches every corner of our lives.

[13:45] There's no aspect of our life that is not infused with the power and the presence and the life of the living God. And you know, you read this out of context and at first it may seem odd for

Paul to compare getting drunk and being filled with the Spirit.

But I just want to make it clear in context that the focus is not on the fact that drinking alcohol is a sin. Some of us struggle with alcohol addiction and that's a battle that we have to fight.

But drinking alcohol itself is not a sin. You see Jesus drinking wine on a number of occasions such that he's actually accused of being a glutton and a drunkard even though I don't believe he was.

You see him actually turning water into some of the best wine people had ever tasted.

I hope one day when we're with him in the New Jerusalem we get to try that wine. I think it's probably pretty good. So it's not about that. The point, the emphasis here is on influence.

Don't be under the influence of alcohol because you know where that leads. chaos and destruction.

Be under the influence of God.

[14 : 54] Let that be your primary influence. So friends, it's worth reflecting what are the influences that most shape how we live?

What are the influences that hold sway in your life? Now it might be alcohol. Or you might have found other ways to numb yourself.

It could be food. You know, that's one that I struggle with. You know I love food. If you were here last week, you know I love food. And I found in myself a tendency to use food to escape.

It could be shopping. It could be pornography. It could be any number of things. So that might be the influence that we're talking about here. It could just be the amount of time we spend on screens.

You know, statistics tell us that the average person these days spends about 49 hours a week on screens. And a lot of that is being shaped by the algorithms, right?

[15 : 56] The social media algorithm. And we need to understand that is a profoundly powerful influence that is constantly shaping and forming us. Many of us who refer to ourselves as Christians are actually being disciplined far more effectively by our algorithm than by anything to do with our faith.

And so what that means is that our entire view of ourselves, our world, God, is constantly being shaped and influenced by something like the algorithm shapes everything.

Right? And so it's worth asking, what are the influences that most shape how we live? And the larger point here, friends, is that some Christians are awake, but our lives are still primarily under the influence of something or someone else.

So if you ever feel that sense of disconnect, like I know I'm a Christian, but my faith just feels irrelevant. It doesn't feel like it really has anything to do with my job or, you know, or you deal with Christians who they, we talk about kindness and love and charity until you get into a political conversation.

And then all of a sudden it's like the rules change and it's like bam, bam, bam. You know? I love and care and pray for my enemies, but I pound these people into the ground, you know, every chance I get. Or any number of things, when you feel that sense of disconnect, I think it's often because the primary influence is driving us or that person is not Christ, it's something else.

[17 : 20] This is Paul's concern. The aim of conversion, the whole reason the Spirit of God wakes us up is, as I said before, so that we can be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And when you say that to a room where there are a lot of Christians, some people always get confused and we say, well, I thought when I came to faith I received the Holy Spirit and how could you talk about being filled with the Holy Spirit?

Because what's interesting here is that Paul's actually talking to Christians. He's just spent several chapters talking about their coming to faith and that they have the Spirit. And now he's saying we should be filled with the Spirit.

and he's not just talking about being like a top-off, like it leaks out and we need a little top-off. He's talking you need to be filled to overflowing. My favorite image of this is an oldie but a goodie and I didn't come up with it.

But the image is of a balloon. You know, and you blow some air into the balloon and then you ask is this full? People say, yeah.

[18 : 25] And then you take it and you blow a little more air into it. Is it full? People say, yeah. Then you blow a little more air. Right? And every time the answer is yes, it's full.

But can it get more in it? Yes. So a couple of chapters earlier in chapter 3 Paul prays essentially that our capacity would be expanded.

Right? So that we would be able to come closer to comprehending the magnitude of the love of God in us. And this is, I think, going back to that. He's saying, you need to be filled. Your capacity needs to be expanded because there's more. You're dealing with an infinite God who wants to pour his life into you. And you say, don't you want more of that? Yeah, give me more capacity for that.

That's what he's talking about. So those who have the Spirit, Paul is saying, I would say, yeah, if you're a believer and you have the Holy Spirit, one of the evidences of that is that you should have a hunger for more of the Spirit.

[19 : 25] And there should never even point in our lives where we say, you know, that's enough. I'm good. More, more, more. And so then Paul, as we have this image of overflowing with the Spirit, he sort of sketches out a non-exhaustive, right?

This is just a representative, non-exhaustive list. Here's some of the things that you see when people are filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. First thing you see is singing.

Singing. Spirit-filled singing. Praising Jesus with our voices. Not just people who like to sing. You know, people like Michael and Nate who can sing, unlike people like me.

But people so moved to sing that there's a kind of self-forgetfulness. They sing with abandon.

Singing praise to the Lord. Singing can be a profoundly spiritual act.

It's interesting, Charles Darwin had no idea how to make sense of music and singing. Did you know this? In all of his evolutionary theory, it explains so much. It made so much sense.

[20 : 36] But he says, all the way to the end of his days, you know, I never really figured out what to do with music. And the fact that all human beings and all cultures everywhere, they all seem to really care about creating and celebrating and performing musically.

They want to sing and play instruments. Doesn't make sense. No evolutionary benefit that he can find. People have researched this ever since his day. And to this day, no one has ever really been able to explain why, from an evolutionary, biological perspective, all human beings everywhere want to sing and make music.

You know, one contemporary neuroscientist named Daniela Samler, there was an article maybe last year in the New York Times about this, but they quote Daniela Samler and she says, here's her conclusion.

This shows us that there may really be something that is universal to all humans that cannot simply be explained by culture. And you know, I read this and I thought, that's right.

Of course there's no purely evolutionary explanation for the human impulse to create music.

Because we were created to be worshipers.

[21 : 51] Our capacity and desire for music comes from the fact that we are living musical instruments. So imagine coming across a clarinet or an oboe and having no concept of human breath and looking at it from a purely materialistic lens.

What is this? What's it for? How did it get here? Why does it look like this? You know, Jamie in our church plays for the NSO.

If you were to invite Jamie to come and to blow her breath into that instrument and you hear the sound that comes out, it all makes sense.

In the same way, when you see a human being filled with the breath of God, that's how the Bible talks about the spirit, the ruach, the breath, the wind.

when you see a human being filled with the breath of God and they are singing with abandon praises to the living God, you say, it all makes sense.

[23 : 09] We were created to be worshipers. We were created like a woodwind instrument to be filled with the breath of God until we overflow with song. So it looks like singing.

It looks like gratitude. Paul says spirit-filled people are thankful people. You know, everyone's thankful sometimes, you would hope.

The spirit leads us to be thankful always for everything, even the hard stuff, even the experiences that we wouldn't choose, that we have to face.

Because when you're filled with the spirit such that the overwhelming influence in your life, the way you make sense of everything, is through the lens of God and his love, then you know that even in the hardest situations we face, God is intimately and lovingly involved in every aspect of our lives.

And so there's a kind of gratitude. Even if I don't understand why, Lord, why, why, why? Make it stop, Lord. But I thank you because I know you and I trust that something is happening in my life

that ultimately is for my good.

[24 : 23] It looks like self-giving love. You know, if you read on to verse, different translations handle this differently. The NIV versus the ESV.

And this passage originally is just one whole passage. It says, being thankful to God for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then it says, comma, submitting to one another, right, out of reverence for Christ.

And so it's all a continuation of the same thought. And so, so some translations separate that and some hold it together. But the point is this, one of the marks of being a spirit-filled person is the posture and the attitude of self-giving love toward other people.

And I would say it's a distinct mark of the spirit to be willing to live in a posture of submission to other people. What do I mean by that? I mean, to willingly put aside your own agenda and to prioritize the well-being of that person even at your own expense.

Because our culture tends to value the opposite. We value independence and autonomy and competence and ambition and success and strength and self-promotion. We learn how to do it in ways that aren't so obvious.

[25 : 34] We don't just brag. We humble brag, you know. We know how to do it. We know how to kind of like, but really what we value is that. And what this is saying is that spirit-filled Christians reflect a different influence.

And we reflect the heart of Christ. You know, as Paul says in Philippians, Jesus didn't grasp after glory. He wasn't self-promotional.

He had greater glory, greater esteem than any of us could possibly imagine. He was willing to empty himself of that. To let it go and to become a way of saying it would be the ultimate servant of humanity.

Willing to give his own life, to be humiliated, to suffer, and to die on the cross to set human beings free. And so Paul is saying spirit-filled Christians reflect that heart in all of their, it just radiates out in all of our relationships.

relationships. And as a final note, friends, this is not an exhaustive list of what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul is such a wonderful theologian of the Holy Spirit.

[26 : 51] He is thoroughly charismatic. And he writes about this in Ephesians and Galatians and 1 Corinthians and Romans. He describes the impact of this on our character in Galatians 5, the fruits of the Spirit.

In Ephesians and 1 Corinthians and Romans, he talks about the spiritual gifts, all the ways God works through us in the life of the church. But all of this comes from the same place, from Christians who are fully alive, fully awake, and filled with the life of God.

And that's the aim. So I just want to spend a little of our remaining time asking what this means for us. Because as we said at the beginning, the Christian life is more than just a set of beliefs and practices.

It is sharing in the life of God. And what we see here, I hope, is that the Holy Spirit is at work in every single one of us every step of the way.

The Holy Spirit is at work every step of the way. So living by the Spirit, right, if you're going to be part of this community, we ask, what does it mean that we care about this, that we live by the Spirit?

[28 : 04] It means a couple of things. One, it means that we depend on the Spirit for our life and growth. There's this great place in Galatians 3 where Paul says, listen, did you come to your faith by the law or by the Spirit?

And so then he goes on to ask them, then why are you continuing to believe that your growth and your sanctification is entirely dependent on words? It's not. You need the work of the Spirit, right? It's the same for us. So this is not just about swapping out one way of living for another. It's not just behavior modification. We should come expecting to encounter the Spirit here through the worship, through the prayers, through the preaching of God's Word, through the sacraments.

When we come to the table, we should be sufficiently aware of what we are about to receive. We should come with that expectancy. And the second thing it means, if it means depending on the Spirit for all of our life and growth, the second thing it means is this.

Living in the Spirit, living by the Spirit means that we encourage the work of the Spirit. We encourage that each person to take that next step no matter where you are on the journey.

[29:23] It's a community that says, my job in your life and your job in my life is to help you figure out where you are in the life of the Spirit and what does that next step look like? Right? So some of us may still be asleep and that's totally fine.

We're just delighted that you're here. No one's going to try to force you to believe anything or change anything about your life. I'm just delighted that you're here.

Whatever change is going to happen in you, it's going to have to come through the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. So our role is just to make you feel welcome. It's just to make sure you know what's going on.

It's just to help you meet people who want to be your friend and we're going to be praying for you and if you want us to pray with you we would love to do that but you don't have, there's nothing required.

You're just welcome to be here. Some of us and I know because we've had these conversations actually in the last few weeks some of us, you're just starting to wake up and I think that's tremendously exciting.

[30:29] You're just starting to be open to the possibility of God and there's a longing in you that you can't quite place and what you need is slightly different. You need a place where you can ask questions and never have to worry about being made fun of or judged.

You need a place where you're allowed to just sort of explore and you do frankly it would be great for you to have people in your life who can help you understand some of the words we use like gospel or how to read and understand the Bible or you know why are we wearing these robes or any of the other things that might be confusing.

You just need people to help you understand that we would love to do that. Tons of people in this church we have core groups that are for that. We have classes that happen at 9 o'clock in the morning that are for that. We're going to be offering the Alpha Course next year which is an introduction to Christianity that's exactly who it's for.

So some of you are just starting to wake up. Some of us are awake but we keep hitting the snooze button. Right? You keep hitting five more minutes five more minutes you know I'll get serious about following Jesus you know next month you know I know I should be more generous and I'm hoping that when I get to this place in my career I'll be able to do that.

You know I know I need to I know I need to apologize to that person but I'm just not ready to have that conversation yet. You know whatever it may be you're hitting the snooze button on Jesus and so you believe but you keep getting lulled back into living as though he doesn't exist.

[32:04] And listen we've all been there I've been there many times but you need something slightly different in your life. You need accountability. You need people you trust.

Asking where in your life might you be refusing to follow Jesus? Where are the parts of your life where you're still saying to God that's mine you can't have that you can't touch that.

And you need those people encouraging you to make Christ your highest priority in life. And then some of us are fully awake. Right?

Because here's the thing if you have active disobedience in your life that has to get sorted out if you want to have the ability to experience the fullness in the life of God.

If there are areas in your life where you're actively rebelling against him then that needs to be your highest priority. But then there are some of us who are fully awake and we are hungry for more. And we have a posture of repentance we're doing everything that we can do to surrender all of ourselves to God and we just want more of him.

[33:10] And what you need you need spirit filled worship. You need people praying for you and with you. You need to know and be using your spiritual gifts. You need the Holy Spirit to continue to transform your character and your relationships.

So you need a community around you that's going to encourage that in you. So I would just leave you with this question for reflection. Where are you right now? Does one of these categories seem to fit you or are you somewhere in between?

Where are you? Where is the spirit at work in your life? And what would it look like for you to take that next step? And how can this community help you do that?

That's what it means to be a church that lives by the spirit. Let's pray. Lord, apart from your spirit these are just words and ideas.

we need this to become flesh in us. We need your spirit to make possible what is not possible in human wisdom and effort. Lord, but we know this, that we are created, we are here to experience your life and to share in it.

[34 : 25] And so we pray that Lord, even as we gather in confession and in prayer and around your table, Lord, that we would have that sense that we would know that you're with us, that we would know that you love us, that we would be filled with your life.

It's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.