Matthew 3:13-17 *Wind and Fire: The Person of the Holy Spirit*

***If the Holy Spirit left…***In February of 2007 I interviewed to be the lead pastor here at Hope Church. This was still relatively early in the hiring process, I believe I had had one or two phone conversations with the search committee and they had watched some video tape of me preaching, but they wanted to meet me face to face. So arrangements were made for me to drive to Spencer on a Friday and have a series of meetings on Friday night and Saturday morning.

Now, as it happened, that weekend there was a huge ice storm in Iowa. Parts of Iowa got between 1 and 2 inches of solid ice, and the wind blew up to 50 miles per hour, knocking down trees and power lines all over the state. By the time I was supposed to drive back home Saturday afternoon, pretty much every road in Iowa was closed. Plus, there were power outages all over the state—it seemed like everybody but Spencer lost electricity. There was no way I was getting back home.

Meanwhile, Beth was 7 months pregnant with three kids and a dog at home. Our house was a parsonage out in the country. Power went out early Saturday morning and it stayed out. We had some good friends—and members of our church--who lived about a mile and a half down the gravel road and they had a gas-powered generator. Beth told them what was going on—which meant we had to come clean about why I was in Spencer—and they invited Beth and the kids (and the dog) to come stay with them. Even then, the generator could only power so much, and it was an old and drafty farmhouse, so it wasn’t all that comfortable.

I ended up picking my way home on Sunday afternoon. Even then, the power wasn’t back, and I had to squeeze into the farmhouse for a day or two. I don’t think it was until Tuesday morning that the electricity got turned back on in our part of the world.

Here’s my point: when the power got shut off, everybody noticed. When the lights won’t come on, when the heat doesn’t work, when you’re worried about the food in your fridge spoiling, you can’t just carry on like it is business as usual. When the power is off, we notice.

With that in mind, let me ask this question: if the power of the Holy Spirit got cut off in your life, would you notice? If the power of the Holy Spirit were eliminated from our church, would anybody be aware of it, or we would we just carry on with business as normal?

A.W. Tozer was a preacher in the first half of the last century. **He said this:**

“If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

That’s a challenging quote, and he said it 70 to 80 years ago. His point is that the people of the New Testament church—in Acts and in Paul’s letters and so on—were distinctively aware of and dependent upon the Holy Spirit. They knew that the power and purpose of what they were doing came from the Holy Spirit being active in their lives.

The question is: are we aware of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence in our lives? Are we as dependent on the Spirit as the early church was?

***Series Set-up***We are starting a new series of messages this week. We’re calling it “Wind and Fire” because wind and fire, as we will see, are both images associated with the Holy Spirit. We’ll be studying what the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit for the next 6 weeks.

But I hope that we won’t just be studying the Holy Spirit, I hope we’ll also be encountering Him. Because if all we do is talk about the Holy Spirit, and look at some different passages where the Holy Spirit is mentioned, and maybe debate one or two ideas about what the Holy Spirit does—if all we do is study the Holy Spirit—then we’ll be missing the point. Because the Holy Spirit isn’t just something to be studied, He’s a person to be encountered. He’s a person who wants to have a relationship with us. He’s a person who wants to be at work in our lives and in our church.

Now, for some of us, this might seem like strange territory. Some of us have church experiences where the Holy Spirit is essentially ignored; and when He does come up it seems kind of “woo-woo” and spooky. For some of us, most of our church experience has kept the Holy Spirit behind-the-scenes and off the stage.

But for others, there are church experiences where the Holy Spirit has been very front-and-center. In some churches, the Holy Spirit seems to take a leading role and everything seems to be about Him. Some of you might wonder why we don’t talk about the Holy Spirit more.

We believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is a big part of our faith; and it’s important that we have a solid understanding of who He is and what He does; and that we have a relationship with Him.

Today, we’re going to start by talking about the Person of the Holy Spirit. That is: Who is the Holy Spirit?

Our main passage is **Matthew 3:13-17**. Here’s what it says:

**13**Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. **14**But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

**15**Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

**16**As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17**And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The question, again, is: Who is the Holy Spirit? We’ll give four answers:

***Three-in-One***First, **the Holy Spirit is God.** The Holy Spirit is a member of the godhead. Fully divine, and yet fully distinct from both the Father and the Son.

One of the things that is unique about the baptism of Jesus is that it is a passage where we see all three members of the Trinity at the same time, and each One is doing something different. **Verses 16 and 17 again:**

**16**As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.

--Here’s God the Son, standing beside the water.

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

--Here’s God the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove. I don’t know if this is an actual dove, representing the Holy Spirit. Or if it is the Holy Spirit, somehow visible to others, descending like a dove. But either way, you have God the Son, standing beside the water; and you have God the Holy Spirit, alighting on His shoulder. And then:

**17**And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

--Here’s God the Father, speaking in an audible voice.

In this one scene, we have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They are all doing something different, but they are all God.

The Holy Spirit is God. The Bible clearly teaches that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all God. They all possess—fully and eternally—all the characteristics and attributes of divinity.

In **Matthew 28:19**, when Jesus gives what we call the Great Commission, He tells His followers to go into all the world and make disciples and baptize them into the name of God. Notice, that’s what it says, “baptizing them in the name,” singular. But when He gives the name, He says “the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” All three, on the same line of the organizational chart, if you will. All three, fully God.

It is not right to speak of the Son and the Holy Spirit as though they were created by God. Scripture affirms that Jesus has always existed, and has always been God (i.e. John 1:1). Same goes for the Holy Spirit. It’s not like they are God’s chief lieutenants. To deny the deity of Jesus or the Holy Spirit is to advocate something entirely at odds with Christianity.

But, at the same time, the Bible makes it clear that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all distinct persons. It’s not like God shows up at various times and in various places with a different identity.

There’s a baseball manager named Bobby Valentine who is sort of infamous for a time—when he was managing the New York Mets—where he got kicked out of the game, and then a little later he showed up in the dugout again with a really cheap looking mustache pasted to his lip. Some people think of the Trinity that way. Like God is at various times disguising Himself as Jesus, and then at other times dressing up as the Spirit, and yet it’s always just the same person in different modes.

But that’s not what the Bible teaches. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all fully divine—fully God—and yet they are distinct from one another. They talk to one another and interact with one another and carry out different roles and responsibilities. That’s why the scene of Jesus’ baptism is so important. We see all three members of the Trinity, all doing something different.

That’s the first thing we need to know about the Holy Spirit: He is God.

***A Friend, Not a Force***Second, **the Holy Sprit is a person.** The Holy Spirit is a person with a will, with emotions, and with a personality. We can relate to the Holy Spirit.

I hope you have noticed that I keep referring the Holy Spirit as “He” or “Him.” That sounds a little strange to us, because the rules of English are such that when you use a word like “spirit” you would expect to match it with the generic pronoun “it.” For example, if I would say:

 “The school spirit was strong at UNI’s football game Saturday night; it really helped the team to victory.”

I wouldn’t say:

“The school spirit was strong at UNI’s football game Saturday night; he really helped the team to victory.”

That would sound strange to our ears. Our muscle memory for grammar, if you will, tells us that is wrong. Spirit is an “it”, not a “he.”

And the same rules of grammar existed in Greek, in which the New Testament was written. The word for “spirit” matched up with the word for “it.” And yet, when the Bible talks about the Holy Spirit, it consistently uses the personal pronoun “he” rather than the impersonal pronoun “it.” For example, in **John 16:13-14** Jesus says:

**13**But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. **14**He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

Grammatically, that doesn’t make any sense; but theologically, it is absolutely true. The Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing.

(And by the way, this is more about the personhood of the Holy Spirit then it is about gender. The Bible consistently uses masculine pronouns for God and for the Holy Spirit, but that isn’t a statement about gender politics so much as it is a reflection of the use of language. There are places in the Old Testament where “wisdom” is personified with feminine pronouns, and some people have connected that to the Holy Spirit. Other than the obvious fact that Jesus came to earth as a man, and God is often referred to as “the Father”, I don’t know how much we are supposed to assign gender to God. The important thing here is personhood.)

And this is important, because it means that we can have a relationship with the Holy Spirit. We can relate Him as a friend, rather than a force.

You see, that’s what happens when we continue to call the Spirit “it.” We think of Him as an impersonal force—this energy field that we can tap into and use as we see fit. In fact, I think a lot of our common perceptions about the Holy Spirit are heavily influenced by the *Star Wars* movies. You know: “Use the force Luke.” We have this idea that the Spirit of God is all around us as some sort of spiritual power reserve and some of us can use it while some of us are missing out on it and others are just unaware of it. A lot of popular spirituality is based on this notion: the Spirit of God is a force to be manipulated and controlled and used.

But God the Spirit will not be “used!” He is free to do as He pleases. He is a person. We can have a relationship with Him. He wants to have a relationship with us.

Part of the problem here, at the risk of sounding blasphemous, comes with the name. If we called the Holy Spirit by a proper name—like Jesse, perhaps—it would be easier for us to relate to Him as a person. Can you imagine: “I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and Jesse”? That would sound weird too, wouldn’t it? But the Bible does not assign a name to God the Spirit other than “the Holy Spirit”, and so that is what we will call Him. Which leads to my third point:

***In My Mind’s Eye*The Holy Spirit is mysterious.** There are some things about the Holy Spirit that are hard to understand. They are, at the risk of sounding redundant, “spiritual.”

So go back to the scene of Jesus’ baptism: why does the Spirit descend like a dove? I’m not really sure. In the second verse of the Bible, the Spirit is pictured as “hovering” bird-like, over the waters. There’s probably a connection there, but it’s mysterious.

Consider the word for Spirit itself. In the Old Testament, the word that gets translated as Spirit is the Hebrew word “***ruach***.” In the New Testament, the word that gets translated as Spirit is the Greek word “***pnuema***”. Both words have the same essential root meaning: **“wind” or “breath.”** You can probably recognize some of our English words like “pneumonia” and “pneumatic” in the Greek word “pneuma.” Words that have to do with air.

These words are supposed to conjure up the idea of wind blowing, the breath of God, the exhale of God huffing and puffing and working His power in the world. Our word “spirit” doesn’t really cut it, but there are no good words. He’s too mysterious.

In John chapter 3 Jesus meets with a member of the Jewish ruling council under the cover of night. His name is Nicodemus (so this is the original “Nick at Night.”) Nicodemus wants to know how he can be born again, and **this is Jesus’ answer:**

**5**Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6**Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7**You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ **8**The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

There’s a lot to unpack there, more than I can get into today. But what I want you to notice is what Jesus says about the Spirit and the wind. Jesus is using the analogy of the wind to get at some of the mystery of the Spirit: “It blows wherever it pleases.” “You hear it’s sound but you can’t see it.” “You don’t really know where it comes from or where it is going.” That’s how it is with the Spirit of God. We can’t control Him, we can’t see Him, but we can see the effects He has on people’s lives.

I want to pause and get a little nostalgic here. In my opinion, the greatest and most influential album of contemporary Christian music came out in 1995. It was called *JesusFreak* by a band named DC Talk, and it incorporated elements of rap, rock and even some 90s grunge. TobyMac, Michael Tait, and Kevin Max. All three are still important figures in the Christian music scene. And if anybody thinks there was a more important Christian album in my lifetime, well I’ll fight you over that.

But anyway, there’s a track later on the album called *In my Mind’s Eye* where the band included a sound clip of the Rev. Billy Graham. The clip ties into John 3, and it’s been impressed on my mind ever since. **It goes like this:**

Can you see God? You haven't seen him? I've never seen the wind.
I see the effects of the wind, but I've never seen the wind. There's a mystery to it.

This picture is really helpful to me. We can’t see the Spirit, but we can see the effects of the Spirit. We can’t see the wind, but we can see the tree-tops sway in the breeze. We can’t see the Spirit, but we can see the changes that are made in a person’s life where the Spirit takes hold. We can’t see someone being born again, but we can see the evidence of a born-again life.

But, at the same time, there’s mystery here.

We probably don’t talk about the Holy Spirit as much as we should, and this is probably part of the reason why. It’s hard to understand how God can be three separate persons and still be one God. It’s confusing to think about how a Spirit can be a person. The Spirit blows like the wind, and it’s hard to comprehend what He’s up to sometimes. There’s mystery in all of this.

But there’s another reason we don’t talk about the Holy Spirit that much, and it’s the fourth answer we can give about who the Holy Spirit is:

***The Spotlight Ministry*The Holy Spirit is Christ-Centered.** The Holy Spirit doesn’t want us to be looking at Him nearly as much as He wants us to be looking at Jesus. The Holy Spirit’s job is to point us to Jesus.

Go back to the **scene of Jesus’ baptism**: you’ve got the Son of God coming up out of the water, you’ve got the voice of God the Father thundering from heaven, and what’s God the Spirit doing? He’s descending like a dove onto Jesus’ shoulder. He’s saying: look at Jesus. Follow Jesus. See Jesus. Jesus is the answer. Jesus is the Savior.

I picked this passage to preach on the Holy Spirit, not because it is about the Holy Spirit, but because it shows the Holy Spirit in His dove-like-descending highlighting the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Even as He operates amazingly and supernaturally and mysteriously and miraculously, He is always pointing people to Jesus.

Earlier, I put John 16:13-14 on the screen**. Let me put it up again**. Notice what Jesus says in verse 14 about the Spirit bringing glory to Him. It’s the job of the Holy Spirit to take what is about Jesus [mine] and make it known to us. The Holy Spirit wants us to see Jesus.

J.I. Packer calls this the Floodlight Ministry of the Holy Spirit. He shares this story:

“I remember walking into a church one winter evening to preach on the words ‘he shall glorify me,’ seeing the building floodlit as I turned a corner, and realizing that this was exactly the illustration my message needed. When floodlighting is well done, the floodlights are so placed that you do not see them; you are not in fact supposed to see where the light is coming from; what you are meant to see is just the building on which the floodlights are trained. The intended effect is to make it visible when otherwise it would not be seen for the darkness, and to maximize its dignity by throwing all its details into relief so that you see it properly. This perfectly illustrates the Spirit’s new covenant role. He is, so to speak, the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior

Some Christians have made the mistake of ignoring the Spirit. If I am being honest about my ministry, and really, the typical Reformed Church, I’d say we probably think and talk about the Spirit too little.

But some Christians have made the mistake of putting too much emphasis on the Spirit. Some churches have focused so much on the Spirit and what He does, that it seems like Jesus gets pushed to the side. As my friend Matt says: “He wants us to be Christians, not Pneumians. Not Holy Spiritists, but Christ-Followers.” <http://matt-mitchell.blogspot.com/2008/02/matts-messages-who-is-holy-spirit.html>

Packer goes on to say:

The Spirit’s message to us is never, “Look at me, listen to me; come to me; get to know me,” but always, “Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him, and hear his word; go to him, and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.’ The Spirit, we might say, is the matchmaker, the celestial marriage broker, whose role it is to bring us and Christ together and ensure that we stay together. [[*Keep in Step with the Spirit*](http://www.amazon.com/Keep-Step-Spirit-rev-enla/dp/0801065585/ref%3Dpd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1202069929&sr=8-1), pg. 66].

The Holy Spirit is Christ-Centered. He wants us to look to Jesus.

It might seem strange that the song we picked as the theme song for this series of sermons on the Holy Spirit is called “In the Hands of Christ my King.” Couldn’t we find a song that at least had Holy Spirit in the name?

But I think it’s exactly how the Holy Sprit wants it. **The first verse goes like this**:

come Holy Spirit
move in power
ignite my heart with your holy fire
show me the Father
show me the Son
revive my soul again
o Spirit come

And then the chorus sings about Jesus. Because **that’s the way the Spirit wants things to be**:

All my hope is found
in the hands of Christ my King
May my life be found
in the hands of Christ my King

The Spirit of God will be eternally happy if we are eternally focused on Jesus Christ! He came down like a dove to turn our attention to Jesus at His baptism. And He’s constantly shining His light on Christ in our lives so that Jesus gets the glory forever.