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John 16:4-15

Forty-eighth Message

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THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT

The 1960's ushered in a new age in American society. We saw the hippie counter-culture, the sexual revolution and the anti-Vietnam war peace movement. The rock musical "Hair" captured these themes, bringing a new musical genre to Broadway. One of its songs, "The Age of Aquarius," spoke of the dawning of a new age based on an astrological event – an age of love, light and humanity:

When the moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars
This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius

Many people were influenced by the Age of Aquarius, but its hypothetical, utopian, wishful thinking was fabricated dust that disappeared in the wind. But there is another age, incomparable in magnitude, which is real, one that guarantees to fulfill the age of Aquarius's hopes and dreams. I am referring to the Age of the Spirit, the age that was ushered in by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question for us is whether we are being influenced by the Age of the Spirit. This is the subject of our study from the gospel of John this morning. Our text includes the last two of five "Spirit" texts in Jesus' upper room discourse.

"These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. (John 16:4-7 NASB)

Repeatedly in the upper room, Jesus has been announcing his impending departure. Because he is leaving, he changes his strategy and now speaks of new things. While he was present with the disciples he could protect them by absorbing all the opposition to himself. But after he leaves, things will change and they will be targets of the world's hatred. Here, Jesus is imparting vital information to the anxious disciples.

There seems to be an unspoken question, though: "Where do you go?" On the surface this appears to be a contradiction of Peter's question in chapter 13, "Lord, where are You going?" (13:36), and Thomas's question in chapter 14, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" (14:5). Perhaps neither disciple was asking the question formally represented by his words. The real question might well have been, "Why are you leaving?" Self-absorbed in their own sense of loss, the disciples are befuddled. They are not thinking about what will happen to Jesus but what will happen to them.

There are grieving and sorrowful. They don't know what will transpire. They cannot see that Jesus' leaving will result in victory and blessing. Their hopes for the arrival of the messianic kingdom are vanishing. Later in the chapter, Jesus promises that their grief will be turned to joy.

His leaving will be a blessing because the Helper or Paraclete will come. If Jesus doesn't leave, the Helper cannot come. If he remains, the disciples will continue to depend on him for their security. But now God's presence won't just be external in the person of Jesus, but internally present as an unending source of life. The disciples are on the brink of a monumental transition.

It is also to our advantage that Jesus departed. We also are recipients of the Holy Spirit who brings life internally and provides the resources to grow in new ways each day. Like the disciples, we also face many transitions that are sorrowful, difficult or challenging: losing someone we love, leaving for college, changing jobs, moving to a different state or country. I am facing a major transition this year. My friend and right hand man in our Twenty-Something group for the past 10 years is getting married. How will I survive without Chad? The answer is, the Holy Spirit. Through each transition the Spirit is present, leading us in truth and love, courage and faith.

But primarily the coming of the Spirit means the coming of the promised age of God, the age of the Spirit, the messianic age prophesied in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel. The following are some of the verses that speak of this age:

"For I will pour out water on the thirsty land
And streams on the dry ground;
I will **pour out My Spirit** on your offspring
And My blessing on your descendants;" (Isa 44:3 NAS95S)

"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a **new spirit** within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. "I will put **My Spirit** within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." (Ezek 36:24-27 NAS95S)

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and **on their heart I will write it**; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Jer 31:33 NAS95S)

"It will come about after this
That **I will pour out My Spirit** on all mankind;
And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions.

“Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.” (Joel 2:28-29 NAS95S)

Paul talks about being sealed with the “Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13). That promise is about to be realized by the disciples.

The Spirit has a dynamic impact in the world, as the next verses indicate.

“And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. (16:8-11)

Some say this section is referring to the world’s sin, Christ’s righteousness and God’s judgment. But this is not the natural way of understanding the preposition “concerning.” The word for “convict” means to bring to the test, prove, refute, convince, expose. It occurs 18 times in New Testament and in every instance the verb has to do with showing someone his sin, usually as a summons to repentance.

The Spirit will convict the world, prove it wrong and expose it as guilty about several things, specifically three: its sin, righteousness and judgment. The Spirit functions as Jesus functioned, forcing a visible division between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

The Spirit exposes the sin of a world made up of people in rebellion against God. People don’t believe in Jesus and therefore do not want God on his terms. The root of sin is unbelief, man’s desire to be god of his own life and to have his own way. The world is unwilling to trust God for everything. The Spirit in the lives of disciples makes this unbelief visible. People become conscious of the fact that they do not believe in Jesus. The hope is that this awareness leads to repentance and salvation.

The Spirit convicts the world concerning righteousness because Jesus went to the Father. The world executed Jesus, but the fact that he went to the Father means that he was vindicated. On the other hand, the world seeks a righteousness or rightness of its own making. God’s people, the Jews, attempted to find religious righteousness through keeping law, and yet the temple had to be cleansed. The world seeks a system or mechanism for being right, for being justified and acceptable. However, the world’s righteousness is hopelessly inadequate and empty. Jesus was the only person who was vindicated and raised from the dead. True righteousness is unattainable through human effort. There is no righteousness apart from God. Notice the shift to the second person pronoun “you.” Jesus is telling the disciples that they will carry on his work through the light of the Spirit by exposing the world’s darkened and deceived thinking.

The Spirit convicts the world concerning judgment because the ruler of this world has been judged. The world pronounced a judgment on Jesus that was totally wrong. In chapter 7 Jesus says that the world judges falsely, by mere appearance (7:24). The world condemns sinners. In chapter 8 Jesus says that his judgment is righteous and true (8:16). Jesus himself is vindicated and he pronounces sinners righteous. The world follows its leader, the ruler of the world, in assessing value and acceptability. But

the ruler of this world is a liar and has been so from the beginning. The triumph of Christ on the cross condemns the ruler of this world and the false judgment of those who follow him. The Spirit exposes the false judgment, the grading system so to speak of the world.

As believers in Jesus Christ we have a mission to the world. It is not something we have to dream up, plan, manufacture or strategize. It is the mission of the Spirit within us. All we have to do is show up and the Spirit brings conviction, exposing the darkness.

Years ago I was playing volleyball with a group of people, none of whom were believers. At one point there was a disputed call as to whether a ball was in or out. In the midst of an argument one of the men said, “Ask John. I will believe what he says.” He knew that I was a believer and would not lie. Another time I was playing golf with a couple of men I didn’t know. One of them swore repeatedly throughout the round. About the 17th hole he asked me what I did for a living. When I told him I was a pastor, he just about died. He asked why I hadn’t let him know earlier. I guess if he had known, he wouldn’t have sworn so much. I told him he certainly seemed a religious man because he talked about God a lot. That is the work of the Spirit bringing conviction.

Why is it that when you tell people you are a Christian, someone will say, “I wish I could believe in something like that.” Others respond by saying, “I’m probably going to hell.” Why do people say those things? Because that is the work of the Spirit continuing the work of Jesus, bringing all men to account. Everywhere we go we have an impact in the world because of the Spirit.

This mission is tough, because the world hates Jesus and his followers. This is also a great challenge, because of our pluralistic society and its belief in relative ethics. “Ethical standards are notoriously relative to time and place and culture. In fact ‘ethical pluralism’ has become almost an article of faith in our highly mobile and differentiated modern societies.”¹

The world will attack and persecute believers, but Jesus sends the Spirit to bear witness to him. The church is not intended to hide and play it safe. Its mission is to continue the work of Jesus by exposing the false beliefs, false security and false standards of the world, with the hope that people might be drawn to the light and life of Jesus. The “Spirit is not the domesticated auxiliary of the Church; he is the powerful advocate who goes before the Church to bring the world under conviction.”²

Next, Jesus speaks again of the Spirit and how he will aid the disciples after he departs.

“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.” (16:12-15)

Jesus says four things about the Spirit. First, the Spirit of truth will guide the disciples in all truth. Jesus is the truth (14:6). This is the third time he has described the Spirit as the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26). Jesus also told the disciples that the Spirit would

help them remember what he had taught them (14:26). The Spirit will guide them not to some new revelation, but to fully understand and teach the truth as it is in Jesus. After the resurrection, the disciples will understand the Scriptures fully and begin to preach the gospel, taking the message into new places and new circumstances.

Second, the Spirit never speaks on his own initiative, on his own authority. Just as Jesus never spoke on his own initiative but only what he heard the Father say, so also the Spirit speaks only what he hears. The Spirit, like Jesus, is utterly dependent on the Father through the Son, and thus ensures the unity of God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in perfect harmony. The Spirit never reveals anything inconsistent with the words of the Son or the Father.

Third, the Spirit will disclose to the disciples what is to come. Jesus is not referring to eschatology but to what is immediately future to the upper room setting. The word for “disclose” or “announce” is used three times in verses 13-15. The Father gives the Son all things and the Son discloses (the same word, “announces”) to the disciples all things through the Spirit. The recipients here are primarily the apostles, who could not bear more than what he was giving them. The Spirit unpacks and makes known the significance of the cross and the resurrection.

Fourth, the Spirit will glorify Jesus. The Son brought glory to the Father, so the Spirit brings glory to Jesus. This truth that the Spirit never seeks his own glory is helpful when we talk about the work of the Spirit in the church. It means that whenever there is some “manifestation of the Spirit” that doesn’t glorify Jesus, then it is not authentic, because it does not align with the teaching of Jesus. This has been helpful to me at times when people get caught up in the work of the Spirit. We do not quench or stifle the Spirit, but we don’t allow ourselves to get sidetracked either.

The Spirit continues to function in the same way today, leading and guiding us in the truth. The Spirit helps us to fully understand the significance and meaning of the Scriptures. The Spirit helps us to discern truth from error. The Spirit gives direction to our lives, keeping us on course according to the plans and purposes of God. The Spirit gives us the confidence to face opposition from the world. The Spirit allows us to glorify Jesus and make him known in every setting.

We live in the information age. With a couple clicks of the computer mouse we can retrieve information on any topic under the sun. We are inundated with mail, phone calls, emails and advertisements – and not just from the pagan world but from the Christian world, with methods, strategies and ministries for how the church is to be effective. How do we sort out all of this information? How does the church stay alive and relevant and effective in the world? The answer is the Holy Spirit.

I marvel at our cell-phone society. It seems like everyone is on the phone – in their cars, in Starbucks, in restaurants, wherever. We are addicted to talking. As I was sitting in the park the other day eating my lunch and reflecting on what I had been studying, I heard a man on the next bench talking away on his phone. It hit me that I too had a wireless connection: it is a hotline to the Father through the Holy Spirit, an invisible cell phone that works

24/7 without recharging. I felt I could start praying out loud and people would assume I was talking on my cell. Wireless technology began a long time ago with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

I am struck by the predominance of the Spirit in John’s gospel. Not only are there five Paraclete sayings in the upper room discourse, the Spirit is mentioned throughout the book. In chapter 1, John the Baptist tells his disciples that there is coming one who will baptize in the Spirit (1:33). Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit (3:5-6). At the end of chapter 3, John writes, “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure” (3:34). Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that if she drinks the water that he offers it will become in her a well of water springing up to eternal life, and that one must worship in spirit and truth (4:14, 24). In chapter 6, Jesus tells the disciples, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (6:63). In chapter 7, Jesus was referring to the Spirit when he said, “he who believes in Me From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water” (7:38-39). Finally, after the resurrection, Jesus commands the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit (20:22), an act of the new creation. Even Jesus’ turning the water into wine in chapter 2 is pointing to the eschatological promise of the Spirit.

John is writing his gospel to the Jews, proclaiming Jesus as the Jewish messiah. John had also been a pastor in Ephesus. But what is he saying in his gospel with respect to the Spirit? I have three thoughts.

First, John is trying to get across the fact that the messianic age has begun. The prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel are now being fulfilled in full measure. There will not be something greater, bigger or better in this world. This might have been difficult for Jewish Christians to swallow, because the messianic age was different from what they expected, which was an earthly kingdom. To them the church might have appeared to be ordinary and small. They might have become discouraged with suffering and tribulation and persecution. John wants to make sure that the church fully embraces the age of the Spirit.

My second thought centers on the idea that through the Spirit, God’s fullness dwells with his people. The Spirit who surrounds the throne in Revelation is now sent to earth to be God’s emissary and presence among his people. The Spirit allows God’s people to be faithful witnesses to God and the Lamb. The Spirit empowers the people of God to face a hostile world. Raymond E. Brown sums up the ministry of the Spirit as “the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.” The fact that the Spirit indwells believers means that “the last Christian is no further removed from the ministry of Jesus than the first.”³ This was particularly important after the death of the eyewitnesses.

My final thought concerns the church at Ephesus. The book of Revelation indicates that Ephesus was in a constant battle against false teachers. The church needed the Spirit to discern truth from error. However, it became so focused on teaching and doctrine that it no longer reflected a community of love transformed by the Spirit. John is concerned about this even as he writes his gospel. The church is in constant dependence on the Spirit to change

people's hearts and produce the fruit of God's character. This is what the miracle at Cana portrayed. The impossible becomes possible. Law, ritual, sacrifice and self-effort do not produce a loving community; only the wine of the Spirit does that.

We are Spirit people living in the messianic age, new creations in Jesus. In the future will be another day of consummation. In the present the new age is not fully here yet, but it has begun. As believers in Jesus Christ we have been allowed to pre-board.

The question is, Are we living in the power and presence, the awareness and dependence of the Spirit, or are we continuing to live under the influence of the spirit of the age of the world? When life gets boring and difficult, we tend to lose our focus and forget the Spirit. But so important is the Spirit that Jesus tells his disciples that it is to their advantage that he leaves so that through the Spirit they can taste the age to come.

The Holy Spirit marks us individually and corporately as God's people, continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Spirit convicts the world that what it is doing is wrong. The Spirit guides believers in the truth, deepening their understanding of the mysteries of God. The encouragement in our text is to live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit, listen to the Spirit and abide in Jesus through the Spirit. We live our lives constantly aware of Jesus being with us in the Spirit. As we live in the Spirit, every day is a new creation. This truth should fill our hearts with wonder and, as we shall see next week, incredible joy.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 214.

² *The Light Has Come*, 211.

³ Brown, Raymond E, *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. (AB. Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

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