

“How Do We Know?”

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⁹Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹²But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.” ²⁴Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.” (Acts 8:9-24)

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the church remembers the remarkable -- seemingly magical -- things that happened as John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. The gospel of Luke relates that, when the baptism was complete, “heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, [saying] ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”¹ At this sacred moment, the power of the Holy Spirit was clearly present audibly, visibly, and palpably.

In the book of Acts, which most believe was written by the same evangelist who composed the gospel of Luke, the Spirit continues to work in mysterious and mystical ways. At Pentecost, as the small but committed band of Christ sat waiting for a sign, “a sound like the rush of a violent wind... filled the entire house where they were sitting,” and tongues of fire divided and rested upon every head, as the entire group “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak” in languages they had never known before. The Spirit was making a splash in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

But it was not the only game in town. In Samaria, a so-called magician named Simon was wowing the crowds as well. We have to admit that there is something about a magic show that gets our attention. Even when we tell ourselves there is no such thing as magic, those shows still pull people in. Even as we look for hidden wires or mirrors, we can still be spellbound by sleight of hand. Even when we stand off to the side with arm-crossed cynicism, we cannot help but ask, “How did he do that?” Apparently, this guy Simon was so

¹ Luke 3:21-22.



good that people were actually wondering if he might have some divine gift – if it might actually be God who was making these mystical feats possible.

But when the Pentecostal disciples took to the streets, they too began to attract big crowds. Simon himself was moved by their words and amazed by their actions. He got in line with everyone else to be baptized, and he even quit doing his own shows so he could follow the disciples around. As the numbers continued to increase in Samaria, word got back to the home church in Jerusalem, and they dispatched the big guns, Peter and John, up to Samaria to take things to the next level. And that is exactly what happened. As Peter and John prayed with the new converts and laid their hands upon them, the power of the Holy Spirit came upon the church much like it had in Jerusalem. It was a power that Simon the magician had never seen, and he wanted some of it. He didn't understand it, but he knew he wanted it.

Despite his faults, I have to admit that I can relate to Simon in some ways, because we are still struggling to understand the mysteries of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it makes many of us uncomfortable to even talk about it. In our December confirmation class, I admitted to the confirmands that I struggle with some of the things that we would call "Pentecostal" today. When I hear about people in the church speaking in tongues or see footage of ecstatic worship services, I have to confess that I tend toward cynicism, especially when it comes to speaking in tongues. I'm not proud to say it, but it sometimes seems like a show, like they are just speaking gibberish on purpose. But I have also heard stories of very real things – miraculous things -- happening in those contexts, things that may really be of God. So, I could not offer anything definitive to the confirmation class. All I could do was share my own struggles, and the fact that I too ask the question, "How do we know that is real?"

It reminds me of that great old chestnut of a joke about the thermos. Some of you have probably heard it. A not-so-great student in a science class asks his professor, "Sir, in your opinion what is the world's greatest invention?"

The professor thinks for a moment, and then says with conviction, "I know! It's the Thermos!"

In the age of computers and space travel, the student was stumped by this answer. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Well," said the professor, "the thermos is a miraculous invention. It keeps cold drinks cold and hot drinks hot."

The student puzzled for a while and then the mystery became clear. "Yeah," he said, "but how do it know?"

That joke makes me chuckle, but that is essentially the question I take from this story of the early church. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, how do we know? Are we seeing a magic act for human entertainment, or is something deeply mystical going on? About five hundred years ago, the Protestant Reformer John Calvin had the same question when he read this passage from Acts when Peter and John laid their hands on the people, and a strange divine power worked through them. "I hear what the apostles did," Calvin wrote, *that is, that they faithfully fulfilled their ministry. The Lord willed that those visible and wonderful graces of the Holy Spirit, which he then poured out upon his people, should be administered and distributed by his apostles through the laying on of hands. I think that no deeper mystery underlies this laying on of hands, but my interpretation is that they made use of such a ceremony to*

signify by their gesture that they commended to God, and, as it were, offered him on whom they laid their hands.”²

For Calvin, the apostolic power of laying on hands is shrouded in deep mystery. In some ways it was a human ceremony, an embodied prayer that God will bless this person. But he could not and would not dismiss the possibility that God was really at work in these actions in the same way that God is at work in baptism, or the Lord’s Supper, when human things are drawn up into something much more than human.

But how do we know? When we see something mysterious that could be God at work in the world, is it just a magic show enacted by humans, or is the Holy Spirit really at work? Like I told the confirmands, I do not have a crystal ball that can answer this question. What I can offer are some strategies that I believe help us answer that question with an open mind – a way for us to leave room for us to see the miracles that God is still working in the world. I offer these ideas not as a spiritual expert, but more like someone who is struggling to figure out how a Thermos works. These are just some thoughts to a fellow cynic and struggler...

The first strategy is to **trust your instincts**. Our first impression is often the best one. Like many, I have really loved the show *Ted Lasso*. Just this last week, we were watching an episode in which Ted was talking with a friend who was struggling with a tough decision. He told her to forget the advice she was getting. “*You just listen to your gut,*” he said. “*And on your way down to your gut, check in with your heart. Between those two things, they’ll let you know what’s what.*” It is great advice. If there is something about a situation that strikes you as mystical... if there is a strange light or peace about it that makes you think God may be at work... trust your gut and check in with your heart. They are often pointing the way down the best path.

The second thing I would say is to **have some friends that you trust** as well. Ted Lasso, for example, has the “Diamond Dogs,” a group of three co-workers that he trusts to help him discern the way forward when his gut and his heart are having trouble making it through the fog. It is a solid strategy, because even Jesus did this. Among the twelve, there were three disciples who were closer to Jesus than the others. At key moments in his ministry, Jesus took Peter, James, and John off to the side. They were even there with him at the moment of his greatest personal crisis, in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus lamented and prayed before his arrest. If you are struggling to determine whether God might be trying to tell you something or lead you in a new direction, it is a wonderful thing to have a group of spiritual friends around you, because God often speaks to us most clearly through the voices of people we love and trust.

Other clues to watch for are things I call “**green lights**.” These are more than just moments of gut instinct. These come along when you have already sensed that God may be at work and you are actively trying to figure out what God may be up to. For example, when I was trying to discern whether God was calling me away from my law practice and into ministry, my gut and my heart were telling me to check it out, and some key people in my life were affirming me and helping me figure it out. But I was still wrestling with the question, “How do you know?” How could I know whether this idea was just something I had dreamed up, or if it might really be the Holy Spirit at work?

² Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4,19, 6.

During that period of discernment, I experienced a number of things that seemed to be signals and signposts pointing the way, but I will share one in particular. At this point, only a few people knew that I was considering leaving my law practice for seminary: my wife, my parents, and my pastor. Those were my Diamond Dogs; no one else knew. But right about then, it just so happened that a contingent from Union Presbyterian Seminary paid a visit to our church. They called it a “caravan,” a group of professors, students, and seminary leaders who would travel from church to church building up relationships with congregations, cultivating support, and, as you might imagine, looking for potential students. I was Moderator of the Diaconate at the time, so Stephanie and I went that evening because I wanted to be a good church officer and do my part and show up when visitors came. But that was not the real reason we went. We went because I was trying to figure out whether to go to seminary, and I wanted to hear from the horse’s mouth what it was all about.

The professor was impressive, and so were the students who spoke. But at the end one of the deans of the faculty stood up to speak. His speech shifted to the kinds of students the seminary was trying to attract. And I remember what he said just as clearly as if it were yesterday. “For example,” he said, “I just had a phone conversation with a new student this afternoon. This person went to Davidson College.” That got my attention.

“Then,” he continued, “they got a degree from the University of Virginia School of Law and has made partner at a good law firm.”

It was at this point that the dean looked right over at my table, and our eyes met as he said, “and that is *exactly* the kind of person God wants to come to Union seminary.”

At that point, my mouth fell open. And I looked over at Stephanie, and her face had the same amazed look. Now, you can say that this was just coincidence, but you will never convince me. I knew that Dean Currie wasn’t talking about me, even though I too had gone to Davidson College... I too had gotten a law degree from Virginia... and I too was a partner in a good law firm. We hadn’t spoken on the phone, so I knew he wasn’t talking about me. But I also knew that he was talking about me. If we are open to the possibility that the Holy Spirit may be telling us something, even if we are still not quite sure what that something may be, we can look for “green lights” that point us down the road we should follow.

Now, I am enough of a Calvinist to admit at this point that all of the things I’ve mentioned so far are fallible. Our gut can be wrong. Well-meaning advisors do the best they can, but they are not always right. And even lights we think are green might really be yellow or red ones that we run right through as a matter of stubborn will. Because we are human, there will always be room for us to doubt or question, “Do I really know?”

That’s why the fourth and final strategy I offer is so important. It may not help us in our moments of decision, but it is important from time to time to pause and look back. Moving forward, our human vision can be cloudy, but, as they say, *hindsight* is 20/20. In my own life, I have been amazed to look back at key periods to realize how the Holy Spirit has been at work all along. Even when we wondered whether God was there at all, even when we could not for the life of us figure out why something was happening or why we were struggling or what in the world was going on, through the power of hindsight we are able to see with remarkable clarity how God has always had divine hands upon us – shaping us, molding us, and leading us down paths that God had prepared just for us all along. With the proof of hindsight, we realize that the faith which sometimes felt flimsy and weak rests – then, now, and forever – securely upon the bedrock of God’s love and care.

As Paul says, we as human beings see as if through a mirror – hazily, dimly, darkly. Someday, we will see clearly and fully, but now we see and know only in part.³ So, the question then was the same as it is now. The people of Samaria were impressed with Simon’s magic act. They were also impressed with the power that came through Philip, Peter, and John. How could they know what was real and what was not... what was of God and what was not? As the church of Jesus Christ felt its way forward, were they getting warmer or colder?

My guess is that they did the best they could with what they had to go on. They trusted their gut, they trusted their friends, and they tried to recognize green lights when they appeared. But all we can really say with some degree of certainty is that, someday, they were able to look back on the path their lives had taken and realize how the God who is faithful and true had been at work all along. And that really is all that we need to know. ***Amen.***

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12-13.