

Imagine hearing from someone you haven't talked to in years. Maybe it was someone you hung around with in your college days. Or a co-worker in your first job, when you were on a completely different path. Maybe it was someone you knew when you were just a kid. This person emails you or "facebook" you and says they'd like to catch up. What would you tell them about the life you've led since you were last in touch?

Twenty years ago, Steve and I were living in Japan and practically speaking, we had our backs to God. I even remember making some disparaging remarks about Christians to a friend of ours while we were there. That friend and I stayed in touch after we left Japan. For years, we wrote letters back and forth. He was in Australia ... we were in Georgia. Eventually, we came home to Christ and at some point I had the strong sense that I should tell our Australian friend what we came to believe about Jesus. After all, we were radically different and I wanted this person to hear not just *where* our life was, but *why* it was where it was. I hoped he would understand our choices ... but even more, I hoped our choices might help him to change.

I wonder if that's anything like how it was with Luke and Theophilis. Luke was a Gentile ... not a Jew ... so it is possible that he wasn't always religious. Then he met Paul, the guy who wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. Luke was a physician by trade ... a left-brain kind of guy ... rational, analytical, objective. He wouldn't have been blown around by every emotional appeal. I don't see Luke running down the aisle to the altar on the third verse of *Just As I Am*. But somewhere along the way, he became convinced that Jesus was who he said he was. He researched the man, his teachings, the eye-witness accounts. He laid that up against history and the Jewish writings and he put it all together in something like a term paper and sent it as a letter to a Greek friend ... a Greek man named Theophilis. Maybe he wanted Theophilis to know not just what he's been up to for the last few years, but how his life had been

transformed by this man ... Jesus ... who they were calling the Messiah. And maybe he hoped Theophilis would be transformed by the truth.

That's what we need to remember about Luke. He was a very intelligent man with an eye to detail, but he was not just about information. He was about transformation. What he looked for ... from before Jesus was born right through to the birth of the Church was evidence for the power of God at work. He looked for the Holy Spirit. And this summer, that's our goal. We're going to look through the book of Luke for where the Holy Spirit is at work. And our goal is not just information but transformation ... to be spiritually renewed.

I have three goals for you this summer. I want you to read the book of Luke. I want you to pray a simple prayer every day, "Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit." And I want you to let me know how that works for you. For this series, we'll be using a version of the Bible called *The Message*. This translation was developed by a pastor who noticed his folks weren't connecting the message of the Bible with their own lives. So he translated the text using words that fit our culture and time. *The Message* isn't meant to be a study Bible. It is meant to inspire love for the Word of God. If you'd like a copy of *The Message* New Testament so you can follow along with this series, you can get one at our cost at the table in the back.

The Message is meant to be read and heard, so I want to read a few verses to you from the first chapter of Luke (Luke 1:26-45) - *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you. She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like*

that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever—no end, ever, to his kingdom." 34 Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man." The angel answered, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you;** Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. "And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God." Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. **She was filled with the Holy Spirit**, and sang out exuberantly, "You're so blessed among women ..."

When Luke started looking for where God was at work, he discovered that when **the Spirit of God fills ordinary people** they do extraordinary things. And he discovered that God *wants* to fill people. Look at how often the Holy Spirit shows up in the first chapter of Luke:

- John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who would become the herald of the Messiah, *was filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he left his mother's womb.*
- Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit at the moment Jesus was conceived in her body. (*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you ...*)
- Elizabeth was *filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly when she saw Mary.*
- Zachariah (father of John) was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. ("*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he came and set his people free.*")

These were all ordinary people who did extraordinary things when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. We will talk later about how we get filled, but for now the point is ... the Spirit of

God fills people. And Paul tells us how we know we've been filled. He says we'll know it because we begin to be *more* loving, *more* joyful, *more* peaceful, *more* patient, *more* kind, *more* good, *more* gentle, *more* faithful, *more* disciplined. Luke shows us that the Holy Spirit is the key to a truly transformed life for a believer.

So go back to your letter to the friend who hasn't seen you in years. Could you say to that person that in the years since they've seen you last you are more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, more good, more gentle, more faithful, more disciplined? That "more" comes from the Holy Spirit. And in just the first and second chapter of Luke I see four marks of a Spirit-filled life.

First, a Spirit-filled life expects great things. The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Highest will hover over you." She couldn't possibly have understood how that was going to work, but her response to the call was full of faith in the power of God. She said, "I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say." *Spirit-filled people hear the voice of God as an invitation to greatness.* Spirit-filled people are not afraid to step out into thin air, because they trust God's hand will be underneath to catch them. There's so much freedom in that.

If you got the book, *Why Good Things Happen To Good People*, read the chapter on courage. The author talks about developing the kind of character that's willing to confront risk. And he connects that kind of courage to having joy in your life. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. As we respond with courage to his call, he gives us *more* love, *more* joy, *more* peace ...

A Spirit-filled life is in touch with God. After she became pregnant, Mary went to see her aunt, Elizabeth, and the story says that even while Mary was walking up the sidewalk, Elizabeth

sensed the presence of God. Her baby even felt it. And she was immediately filled with the Holy Spirit. Nobody had to tell Elizabeth that Mary was pregnant with God's Messiah. Elizabeth was just that in touch with God.

I have to tell you what happened to me last week. Some of you know I was at Annual Conference. That's the annual meeting of United Methodists. It is a mandatory thing for pastors, and there are no excused absences. You are expected to be there. For the first eleven years of my ministry, I hated annual conference. It can be political and competitive and for three or four days we sit and listen to reports. But something changed this year. Last Monday, I was sitting with the Lord and talking to him about Annual Conference ... or complaining about it ... and God gave me a vision. He showed me that a roomful of pastors (about a thousand of them) is a roomful of insecurity. Every single pastor in that room has three people who are angry with them for reasons they don't get, and every single pastor has more work than they could possibly ever get done, and every single pastor is carrying the weight of the burdens of people they love, and half the pastors in the room are having to be at this conference at the same time they are packing up to move, and half of those pastors are having to move someplace they don't want to go or from someplace where they were not well loved.

Can you imagine a roomful of people more in need of grace? So God challenged me this year to go there and just love and listen and pray ... and to leave my negative vibes at home. So I did. And do you know what God did? He filled me with love for my Methodist family. All week I was simply amazed by how much love God had poured into me when I opened my heart to his people. And I think about this place and about how we walk into this room on Sundays. When we who call ourselves followers of Jesus walk into a room, do we bring life with us? The people in this room are in the middle of difficult situations and broken relationships and work

stress and many of you are carrying the weight of the burdens of people you love. This is a roomful of people in need of grace, too. What if you are the one God is calling on to bring life into this room? Or into your office ... or into your home ... not to receive so much as to love and listen and pray ... to bring life? Are you going to say with Mary, “Whatever you need, God ... I’m yours”?

A Spirit-filled life looks for the will of God. One of the first people we meet in Luke 1 is Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He was one of about 18,000 priests in Israel at the time, and when we meet him he had just been chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime chance to go into the Holy of Holies to present the incense offering. While he was in there, an angel came into the room and explained to him that Elizabeth was about to have a baby who would get people ready for God. Zechariah had a little bit of a chip on his shoulder and questioned the angel. It’s kind of a funny moment. The angel strikes him silent for nine months for asking a question. When he finally got to speak again, the first thing he did was to tell everyone that God has a plan. He isn’t just winging it. God is always at work and he is always showing us where he is working so we can join him. The key is in the watching. Spirit-filled people watch for where God is at work so they can join Him.

A Spirit-filled life is abundant. I found a sad website last week. Its called “God is imaginary.” Whoever produced the site provides fifty proofs that God is imaginary, and to be honest, he makes a few good points. He wonders, for instance, why Christians don’t follow the Bible on basic points like giving. He wonders why Christians don’t love like Jesus. Those are probably valid questions. Why do we claim the Bible if we don’t live it? The one thing I could not find in his fifty proofs that God is not real is that life without God is great. He never once even comes close to saying that life without God is *more* loving, *more* joyful, *more* peaceful,

more patient, more gentle, more good, more kind, more faithful, more disciplined. He has not one shred of evidence on his site for how life as an atheist is abundantly *anything*.

Meanwhile, one of the most reasonable, intelligent people of the first century ... who was there when the Holy Spirit was filling people and doing an amazing work in the world ... tells us that life in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, is an abundant life.

And that's what I want for you. I want you to have the abundant, Spirit-filled life. More than anything, I want this room to be full of people who are more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, more gentle, more good, more faithful, more disciplined. I want you to live a life so transformed by the power of God that everyone around you senses the life that is in you. Jesus said that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. That's what I want for you. More love, more power, more of Him in your life.

Think of it like water. About 60% of the human body is water. The brain is 70% water, and the lungs are nearly 90% water. Babies have more water than adults. What would happen if we decided that the water we have is enough ... that we don't need any more water in our bodies? What would happen if we stopped drinking water? Would the water we're born with be enough to get us through? No. In the same way, when we are born into the Kingdom we receive the Holy Spirit. But if we stop there, we won't thrive spiritually. In fact, we could end up losing our sense of thirst and end up thirsting to spiritual death. This morning, I want to invite you to come and drink from the waters of life. Come, all you who thirst.