

“Ours to Receive” – A Sermon by Rev. Janice Reynolds, July 19, 2026

Isaiah 43:1-7 (NRSV Translation)

43 But now thus says the Lord,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
⁴ Because you are precious in my sight
 and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
⁶ I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
 and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
 and my daughters from the end of the earth—
⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.”

Acts 8:14-17 (CEB)

14 When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God’s word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria.
15 Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. (16 This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)
17 So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

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SERMON

Last Week, I had an interesting conversation with Steve, one of my pastor friends. He had just returned from Africa on a Christian mission trip with young adults.

Two things particularly stood out for him on his trip. First, he could see brimming spirituality in these young Americans. They felt called to service from a deeper place. 10 years ago, when Steve led the group, the youth came for the travel and their faith seemed performative. He mused on whether Generation Z is more spiritual because of the times they live in.

Additionally, Steve noticed the “spirit in the air” in Kenya, just as he had on his last visit. A sense of shared communal spirit among the native people there. He said, “The Holy Spirit is alive in Kenya.”

I’ve noticed that on two extended trips to Bali, where diverse people live side by side. Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists. There is a deep tranquility in the daily rituals of life. Hindu women making fruit and flower offerings. The ethereal Muslim call to prayer in the northern beach areas. The proliferation of serene Buddha sculptures in the luscious gardens. The Spirit in the air is palpable in Bali.

Steve is a Pentecostal pastor. He’s no stranger to the workings of the Holy Spirit. He was reared in a conservative church in San Francisco where he still lives. He’s kept open to growing theologically and culturally throughout his life.

That’s led him to teach Bible studies to Christian seminary students in India. He senses that they have a living relationship with the Holy Spirit. And he wonders whether this springs from their Hindu culture and naturally extends to their Christian spirituality.

We aren’t denying the inevitable dark side of any culture. But Steve and I agreed that we somehow feel hopeful, recalling our perceptions of God’s Holy Spirit at work in these countries. And we discussed that there are subtle indications that the Holy Spirit is being received throughout our American culture as more people seek solace, and pray for calm and spiritual safety in a world so torn by violence and aggression.

Today’s stories in Isaiah and Acts are about people who feel out of sync with their prevailing culture, like many of us. And yet, they experience God’s unconditional love, presence, and blessing.

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In Acts, John and Peter rush from Jerusalem to the new Christian community in Samaria. Although the Samaritans had already been baptized, apparently, they hadn't yet received the Holy Spirit! This seems alarming to the emerging Christian community; it's an emergency! So, John and Peter set out to visit them to make things right.

But what is Luke saying here? Baptism is no small matter! In ancient Judaism, cleansing in water signified a fresh start toward something new. In our Reformed Christian tradition, the Sacrament of Baptism recognizes our essential belovedness in God's eyes, and our welcome into the Christian community.

The age-old ritual of Christian Baptism demonstrates the presence of God with us. It is not so much an appeal for the descent of God's Spirit as it is an acknowledgment of God's constant presence with us and a proclamation of our belonging.

So, it's a big deal that this community of Samaritans, so recently reviled by the Jews, received baptism. This cultural group is seen as beloved by God and welcomed in.

Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary suggests that John and Peter rush to the Samaritans, not to legitimize their baptism, but because Peter and John themselves doubt that God can indeed work outside the limits we place on God.

And so it is with us. We default to imagining there is a restriction of God's grace and presence. We fight against our own worthiness. We fear that we don't quite measure up in God's realm of love. In our western “left-brain-ness”, we doubt there is really such a thing as the unconditional presence of the Holy Spirit in and with us. And so, we have little hope that God really has any reach or effect at all!

Yet, Karoline Lewis writes that the book of Acts “offers the extraordinary claim that God's Spirit will fall on everyone, as much as we try to circumvent such reckless grace.”

As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit surrounds and welcomes us, whether we recognize it or not. Before our baptism or without baptism, we are accompanied and loved unreservedly by God.

And whatever our faith heritage or culture, humans are created to know God and to have the capacity to receive and bask in God's Spirit. God's Spirit falls on everyone! Reckless grace, as Lewis says.

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That’s a concept that can be hard to swallow, isn’t it? We might believe this in principle, but who do we see as outside the realm of God’s grace and presence? Think of the people you most disagree with now: a relative, perhaps, or a person or group outside your framework of belief or political ideology. Imagine that! They have equal access to God’s incoming Spirit and grace!

The Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr writes, “We have a hard time with that kind of justice. We’re capitalists, even in the spiritual life. If we work more, we expect more, and we don’t know what to do with a God who breaks that rule... All through the Gospels, Rohr says, people receive what they don’t deserve. Relentless generosity is hard for us to comprehend, much less practice.”

So, the Holy Spirit often breaks through without our consent, perhaps even when we least deserve it! Surprising moments of being moved to tears, to delight, and action. Pure Gift! And the Holy Spirit can also be respectful of us and wait until we notice its subtle nudge.

When we pay attention to the presence of the Spirit of God, we almost always experience unconditional love, a deep body-and-soul knowledge that God is present with us. We become aware of the comfort, insight, care, and hope that God imparts.

The journalist David Brooks has tracked his own growth journey through his many books. A while back, he wrote a courageous Op Ed in The New York Times. He tracks his path from an agnostic Jewish man grappling with the times, to growing in faith and relationship with God through “numinous experiences” over many years. He calls it being in relationship with “radical delight and goodness.” Brooks is almost giddy with gratitude that he can’t earn God’s favor or love. He quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel, “I prayed for wonders instead of happiness, Lord, and you gave them to me.”

So well-educated older men are receiving this grace, and why not? And as I mentioned earlier, there is a resurgence in spirituality among Generation Z. In a recent large survey of young people 13-25, a solid half say they are spiritual, and another 30% say they are “slightly” spiritual.¹ That’s hopeful!

At the beginning of this sermon, we learned about the Jewish Exiles in Isaiah and the Samaritans in Acts knew the presence and grace of God. And my friend Steve’s and my experience of three very different cultures in Kenya, India, and Bali, unlike ours in many ways, literally seem to breathe in the Spirit of God in their everyday environment. And

¹ Four dimensions of young people’s spiritual and religious lives, Survey by Springtide

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many young people these days have a natural openness to experiencing God’s Spirit that informs their lives.

These “others,” people very different from us, are met with the love, comfort, and hope poured out on them and they gratefully receive it. Their quality of life and their positive impact on their world grows.

That is hope for us, my friends!! Hope for us in the life of this church. Hope for the United States of America and our youth, hope for the world for its true security, that God’s Spirit is among ALL of us, never letting us go.

As spiritual teacher and psychologist John Prendergast expresses, when we are open, we experience “Our heart within the Deep Heart” of God.

Please join me in this guided prayer of the heart, in which we may perceive and receive the Holy Spirit. Please participate as you feel comfortable.² If you have a sermon script, perhaps put it down for this portion and just listen.

First, please close your eyes if you desire, or lower them.

1. Take a few deep, slow breaths, sensing your lower belly, and relax.
2. Feel the weight of your body in your seat, and sense how the earth’s gravity is holding you.
3. Breathe deeply but comfortably. Exhale fully into the place beneath your feet. Wait for your in-breath to come on its own.
4. Feel yourself held by God’s Spirit, by Love, by Christ’s Presence (whatever feels the most at home to you) and relax into it. Let yourself be held.
5. Sense into your heart area and feel that you are seen and loved just as you are.
6. Now join in the infinite field of loving awareness.

Your heart in the Deep Heart of God.
Let’s rest in silence for a moment. Amen.

² This practice is called *Feel Yourself Being Held*, found in John Prendergast’s book “Deep Heart.”

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This is the work of the Holy Spirit, in union with all.

It just takes a few moments to re-orient to our authentic selves in God, for our own well-being and the well-being of everyone we connect with. The good news is that we already possess this generous gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us and every other person.

With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we grow in Holy Hope that all shall be well. God’s love and presence, available for everyone. Ours to receive.

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