

If you look at the gospel reading for today you will see that it references two separate passages, bookends to the passage in which Jesus feeds the 5,000, and that moment in the storm when Jesus walks on water and quiets the wind and sea. Those middle pieces are significant moments in Jesus' ministry, but we can also learn something from these bookend passages.

1. The disciples have returned from their first sending. They recount to Jesus their success, so yes, faith works.
2. Jesus know that their work has exhausted them, and that they need to rest, as we all need to rest, to take rest seriously.
3. It's had to get away, the needs of the world are never-ending. Yet we are still called to respond with compassion, as Jesus responded with compassion.
4. Jesus could only be in one place at a time. He did not become incarnate to personally heal all the ills of occupied Palestine. That is why he sent us the Holy Spirit.

Mark doesn't say that much about the Holy Spirit, it descends at Jesus' baptism and John says that Jesus will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. It is in the Gospel of John that we hear more about the Holy Spirit, to whom Jesus refers as the Advocate. The word "Advocate" can also be translated as comforter and helper.

Jesus tells his disciples that he has to go away otherwise they will not receive the Advocate. (John 16:7) Jesus explains that the Advocate is the Spirit of truth, the Spirit that will testify to the truth about Jesus and enable the disciples to go out and testify about Jesus. (John 15:26-27) After his resurrection Jesus will breathe on the disciples giving them the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins. (John 20:22-23) The Spirit will abide with them and in them and be with them forever. (John 14:6)

The Holy Spirit is now the active presence of God in the world, it is what calls us to God in Christ.

As baptized Christians we have been reborn by the Holy Spirit and cleansed from sin so that we might participate forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ. (BCP pg 301)

That's all well and good when we are baptized as babies but having our ticket punched in baptism doesn't end the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, we need to cultivate the Spirit within us or we won't experience that gifts that it brings. The Spirit is what will bring us to Christ, to help live our lives in Christ.

It is the Spirit that stimulates our longing for God, for meaning in a life that is beyond our mortal existence. We could call the Holy Spirit the Holy nudge, which encourages us to take the right path, to make the right decision. I said nudge, not noodge, that famous Yiddish word for someone who is persistently pestering or complaining, but truthfully, I wouldn't put it past the Holy Spirit to indulge in such tactics when the need arises.

This process of conforming to Christ is what we are called to do throughout our lives, and it has distinct moments or phases; together they form a somewhat repeatable pattern. (Thank you, John MacQuarrie)

The first is the acceptance of sin, the acknowledgement that no matter how hard we try, we sin constantly, we are a part of the great sinfulness of the world. Harsh words, thoughtless actions, indifference to the injustice and suffering of the world, violating the commandments we sin on individual and corporate levels. Then there comes that big moment of accepting sin and our sinfulness and realizing that we need something beyond ourselves to heal. It's the moment in the 12 steps of acknowledging the wrong that we have done. It is the Holy Spirit helps us to see when we are ready to acknowledge our guilt and complicity in "those things done and those things left undone." (BCP pg 360)

Once we accept the reality of sin we don't need to fall into despair, Jesus has promised forgiveness of sin to those who repent. We can't benefit from God's forgiveness unless we acknowledge the reality of sin. Then we need to let go of our pride in thinking that we can do it by ourselves. God's forgiveness, which we experience through the Holy Spirit gives us a clean slate and gives us a fresh start, something we need on a regular basis.

The Holy Spirit also works in us to help us understand that we have been chosen by God. Jesus chose his disciples as he has chosen each one of us. But we also have to make a choice to accept what it means to be chosen. And it is the Holy Spirit, the Holy nudge that helps us to do that we have to choose to live into the person that Jesus has given us a chance to be. We nurture that choice through prayer and worship, through becoming part of a community, and through our actions when we choose on behalf of the greater good rather than just for our own well-being.

Last, we come to moment of justification, of being made right with God through the Holy Spirit. It's like that moment in the chiropractor's office when something that was out of alignment suddenly slips back into place. We are our whole selves again.

We are familiar with the phrase "justification by grace through faith" the rallying cry of the protestant reformation. It means that we can't save ourselves, Jesus made salvation available to us but we have to cooperate with the grace given us by the Holy Spirit. It's the freedom into which we live when we are in relationship with God, when we accept that God knows us and loves us in spite of ourselves, and that we know God through Jesus Christ.

Although I have described these stages as if they were sequential, they are a repetitive pattern, part of what we call sanctification, the process of conforming ourselves to Christ. We sin regularly, we ask for forgiveness, we begin to live into what God intended to be even when that's frequently a two steps forward, one step backwards kind of a process, and lastly that we can come to trust that God's grace will be present and active in us through the Holy Spirit whenever we do the work of the Lord whether it be in prayer, in worship, in work, or in play.

Remember that we are all disciples, commissioned to show God's love to the world. Remember to rest because this is hard work. Remember that God's work is never done. And remember to trust in the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus will be present whenever two or three are gathered in his name.

Amen.