

“What Does This Mean”?

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **5** Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." **14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: **17** "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. **18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. **19** And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. **20** The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. **21** Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Sermon

Pentecost! What an appropriate day to celebrate this church's 187th anniversary. This morning I want to explore with you Luke's description of the *first* birthday of the Church in Acts chapter 2. Acts is Luke's second volume for Theophilus, whose name means "one who loves God" and who was possibly Luke's patron. The book provides an explanation for the growing phenomena of Christianity, it explains the Church's evangelistic mission, and provides encouragement for churches that – in some locations - were struggling after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Birthdays are a good time for nostalgia. Where stories are told of the beginning and fond memories are recalled - and even elaborated upon! Luke's story places the first birthday of the church at the time of Pentecost, which is the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after the Passover. This festival marks the beginning of the wheat harvest, a celebration of the *first fruits* of the new crop. The *beginning* of the new community of followers of Jesus was, in Luke's mind, just the first fruits -

with much more to follow. Coincidentally, because this feast occurs around the same period of time as the covenant-making moment at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, it was – and is - a good time for recommitment and rededication. Consequently it was a time of *pilgrimage* for devout Jews to visit Jerusalem from across the known world.

The disciples were all together in one place when God’s presence came in power. Luke’s mention of a violent wind and tongues of flame means that the prophesied coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled beyond a doubt. What happened was that the Holy Spirit filled *everyone* present; God does not give half-measures, but is lavish. The Spirit belongs to everybody. And they started speaking in other human languages. Devout Jews who were in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage were completely baffled because they *could* understand the disciples’ message in their own native languages. Luke tells us that people were amazed and astonished, not least because in those speaking were common Galileans, who were not noted for their linguistic talent. This is in keeping with God’s sense of irony and who throughout the Old Testament often used unlikely people in unlikely situations to further his purposes.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11, we read of God confusing people’s speech which caused them to abandon the building project and to scatter throughout the known world. At Pentecost, God symbolically reversed that act of dispersion, as pilgrims came from throughout the known world and heard God’s message in their own languages.¹ Instead of *confusion* there was now *comprehension*. This image also serves as a hint of the final fulfillment at the ultimate harvest when all those who belong to Christ will be safely gathered in.

When God comes to town there is a *public* reaction! When something like this happens there is usually more than one response. One group asked: “what does all this mean”? Another group mocked, “They are all drunk on new wine”! In the face of this crisis of public skepticism, the Spirit of God spoke through Peter and all present had an “awakening experience”.

Let’s pause here for a moment, because I would like you to consider Luke’s love of birth narratives. At the beginning of his *gospel* we read of story of the birth of Jesus to humble parents, an event that was unmarked other than for the visitation of socially-outcast shepherds. When Jesus was presented at the Temple, Simeon recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah. He realized that the Jesus-child was “God’s salvation which God had prepared in the presence of *all* peoples, a light for revelation to the *Gentiles* (non-Jews) and for the glory of God’s people, Israel” (Luke 2:31-32). That simple sentence summarizes the contents of the rest of Luke’s gospel. And *how* that salvation will appear is mentioned two chapters later in Jesus’ first sermon at Nazareth. There Luke has Jesus quoting from Isaiah as a way of explaining in miniature the mission of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18).² In the

¹ In Luke’s mind, God would have brought those pilgrims. Moreover the ‘reversal’ is only partial, since all the different languages are retained.

² He writes: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the covering of sight to the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

same way, the book of Acts begins with the birth narrative - the birth of the church. And Luke also uses Peter's speech to quote Joel's prophecy in order to explain the baffling events of the day and present in miniature the mission of the church - which is to be a community of *proclamation*.

One-third of the book of Acts is taken up with *speeches*. The Old Testament prophets were commissioned by God before they spoke as his *messengers* to the people. Isaiah had his lips touched by a purifying fire (Isa 6:7) and Jeremiah had his mouth also touched by God (Jer 1:9). In this context, the tongues of fire can be understood as freshly inspired prophetic speech. Luke was therefore emphasizing that Peter should be deemed as authentically interpreting the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures. His message was *insightful* and it was a speech that was not simply boldly-delivered, but one that also *persuaded*. That aspect of persuasion is demonstrated by how the people responded: 3000 become converted and the church was born. This is a sure sign of God's continuing presence in Peter and the rest of the apostles. Just as in *Jesus'* the first sermon in Luke 4, *Peter's* first sermon also bears witness to God interrupting a conventional day in a most unconventional way.

Peter's sermon rationalizes the irrational. He reinterprets Joel's prophecy as being fulfilled today. That God has indeed fulfilled his promise and poured out his Spirit on all people in unconventional ways. The Spirit is given so that *young* people, both male *and female*, will proclaim God's activities. This is a shocking statement for a male-dominated culture that valued the wisdom of the elders. But it gets worse, God's Spirit is not just for kings and priests, but is even given to lowly *slaves* - both male and female, and for that same task of proclamation. God's Spirit blows like a mighty wind and has no respect for status, gender, age, or race – *God's Spirit is for everybody*. And therefore, continues Peter – quoting the prophet Joel, “*everyone* (not just Jews) who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved on the Day of Judgment.”³

Once the Spirit came in power, the waiting was over and God's mission began from Jerusalem to the rest of the known world, including Rome – the center of all political power. As Luke tells the story, God's Spirit-enabled mission was first to devout Jews and then later to non-Jews - primarily through the work of Paul. Remember, Peter's first speech was to faithful followers of God, *not to unbelievers*. These were people who were struggling with doubt and despair wondering why God seemed *not* to be doing anything in *their* day. They - like many today - were wrestling to retain a bold and confident faith in the face of harsh reality of their own circumstances.

This brings us to the question: What does all this mean for today?

First, we are reminded that the distinguishing mark of the church is the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is reminiscent of the psalmist who says: “Unless the *Lord* builds the house, the laborers work in

³ There is an added significance to that statement. The word “*Lord*” in Greek is linked to the Jewish word for God in the *Greek* translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, a book that many Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire would have used. God's own name is now linked to Jesus – God's special Chosen One, the risen Messiah. We are therefore to call on Jesus as our Lord or Ruler to be rescued, not to Caesar or any other political power.

vain” (Ps 127:1). Without the Spirit - who is the Helper, the Enabler - the church will eventually flop. However well-intended and well-meaning our efforts, there will be no story to tell. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church will become like the Tower of Babel project. People will simply give up and abandon the building project and be scattered throughout other locations where the Spirit *is* present.

This is not meant to be discouraging, rather the opposite: to *inspire hope and as we continue to be expectant for what God wants to do here today, in 2015 and beyond*. Luke reminds his readers: *what God did on the first birthday of the Church, God can do again* in new times and new situations. At Pentecost, the followers of Jesus were *waiting* - waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to come. Are we waiting expectantly for God’s Spirit to come afresh to us? Today is a good day to pray that prayer for God’s re-awakening.

Second, and in conclusion, the Nicene Creed mentions the four *marks of the Church*. The Church is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. This means we are a *united* people who work harmoniously together for God’s honor – not our own. We are a *holy* people; that means set apart to bring God’s blessing and wholeness to our wider community. We are *catholic*; that means “universal” – the Church is for everyone. We are *apostolic*; that means we are *sent* as witnesses to proclaim all that God has done - and is doing in our lives and in the world. A proclaiming Church that is united, welcoming of everyone, and one that is becoming more like Jesus, demonstrates all the marks – or signs - of the Spirit at work.

At this time of recommitment and rededication to what God is doing here, may God continue to surprise us in unconventional ways on this Anniversary Sunday. Amen.