

Acts 2:1-21; Philippians 4:4-7

The first mention of Pentecost as a feast of the church comes in the second and third centuries. Pentecost as a major festival did not originate with the Christian church. It was a Jewish celebration, falling fifty days after Passover. It was a festival of thanksgiving for the grain harvest as well as a celebration of God's covenant handed down at Sinai, again fifty days after the Exodus. It was a day for recalling the powerful, gracious, life-giving presence of God. In both the Orthodox and Western churches, Pentecost is a celebration of the animation of the church by the Holy Spirit. At one time, it was considered the second most important feast after Easter.

The wind of Pentecost connects to the accounts of the wind (spirit) of God moving over the abyss before creation, driving back the flood in the time of Noah, separating the waters of the sea to let Israel pass through from slavery to freedom, and signalling to Elijah that God's fearsome power is, sometimes, best heard through a still, small voice.

The fire of Pentecost connects to the smoking fire pot and flaming torch that sealed the covenant with Abram, the burning bush at the call of Moses, the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness, the cleansing fires of Psalms, and the judging, consuming fires of Elijah and the prophets.

The opening verses of Acts take the reader back to Luke's Gospel. The risen Jesus has already prepared the disciples for this moment. Having appeared to them after his resurrection, Jesus promises to deliver what his Father has promised to

him: “power from on high.” Acts opens by returning both to this promise and to the words of John the Baptist that the disciples are to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus’ ministry begins with the Holy Spirit descending upon him at his baptism, Pentecost ignites the mission of his disciples.

Luke describes the completion of what John the Baptist began. It describes not the birth of the church, but rather the empowerment of the believers to bear witness to the ends of the earth, as promised. The disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit “comes upon” them. Divided tongues like fire!? Violent, howling wind!? It is one thing to receive a promise, quite another to be thrust into the midst of its fulfilment.

The 120 believers who constitute the earliest community of Jesus, are in Jerusalem for Pentecost or Shavuot. Gathered “all together in one place”, those first followers have no clue as to what is about to happen among them. There is Jesus’ promise that they will testify about him “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. But that promise is short on details, lacking specificity like many of today’s election promises.

These disciples have seen Jesus’ body hanging on a Roman cross – a most definite deterrent to bold speech or proclamation. Still adjusting to the idea that Jesus has been raised from the dead, they are not entirely certain what his resurrection means or how it will impact their lives. How in the world can this small band with so few resources and lacking a strategic plan, testify “to the ends of the

earth” in a culture that is likely to reject its message?

How? By the power of the Spirit of God, from which they learn that:

First, God’s Spirit is not ours to control. At the first post-resurrection Pentecost, the Spirit appeared as divided tongues of fire, a manifestation different from its appearance as a dove at Jesus’ baptism. The howling of a wind that filled the room was a new form of the breath of God blowing warmth and life into Creation. God’s Spirit is not restricted by human will or desire. We cannot drive its wind or stop its force, any more than we can control a hurricane squall. We cannot catch it, contain it, control it, or confine it.

Like the burning pillar of fire by night that accompanies the Israelites through the wilderness, this fire-like Spirit resting on the heads (and tongues) of the disciples guides them into God’s mission, taking them places they could never imagine and giving them confidence to speak about the God known to them in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, God’s Spirit is active where we least expect it. It is a sensually provocative scene with heavenly sounds filling the house, little tongues like fire resting on each person, and then the sudden experience of having languages you never studied popping out of your mouth as easily as your mother tongue. It is a humorous scene with the festival pilgrims from across the empire and residents of Jerusalem hearing their native languages spoken by this group of mostly uneducated Galileans. Not surprisingly, the experience leaves them feeling bewildered, amazed, astonished and perplexed. Some even sneer about it, accusing

the speakers of being drunk.

On that first Pentecost, Joel's prophecy is fulfilled right before their eyes. They see and hear God's spirit being poured out on all sorts of people – sons and daughters, old and young, even servants – but they need Peter's help to make sense of it. Do we notice where the Spirit is being poured out today?

Could it be on the young persons we fear we cannot reach, the older persons we fear will not try something new, the marginalised persons we too often do not even notice? If we watch and listen for the Spirit moving among them, perhaps we will hear them speaking, dreaming, envisioning, being caught up in the power of the living God.

Thirdly, God's Spirit empowers proclamation. Surprisingly, perhaps, the gift of tongues at Pentecost is not poured out for the disciples' own sakes. It is not given so that they might say, "Look at us! We learned a foreign language without going to class!" The purpose of the gift is not to brag about their cutting-edge ministry nor to praise their growing church, but rather to praise God.

There are no bonus points for being a recipient of the Spirit's movement. The purpose of the gift is so that its recipients might speak out about what God has done. The disciples speak in languages familiar to their hearers; in this case, immigrants from a variety of places. The disciples do not manufacture this power, they receive it from God. The ability to speak the Gospel in words that others will understand rests on the power of God and the believers' openness to be moved to proclaim what

God has done through the centuries and is doing now in the lives of God's people.

Lastly, God's Spirit is poured out for the sake of God's world. Pentecost is not only a celebration of the birth of the church. It is also a celebration of the certain and sure promise that, wherever the fire burns, wherever the wind blows, wherever chaos and life intersect, the Spirit of God is there, blowing where it will and driving God's people into the heart of God's mission.

As many traditional churches agonize over declining membership and what to do about a millennial generation of "nones", perhaps we might take a page from this first-century play-book. Where do we see God at work in our midst? What has God been doing in our churches, our homes, our work-places, our communities, our everyday lives, and even in places we do not expect?

The miracle in Acts does not reside with the speaking of the disciples but in the hearing of the crowd. They hear the gospel in their own languages. This is what we all want: through the work of the Spirit to communicate with every person in a language particular to that individual. Significantly, the first act of God's Spirit at Pentecost honours the diversity and individuality of the believers. God's Spirit does not first insist that the Spirit-induced testimonies sound the same or employ the same grammatical inflections and conjugations and phonetics. Devout males, Jews and proselytes from every nation, who had travelled from Africa, Rome, and Asia, hear this group of disciples speaking to them about the mighty acts of God in their own languages. God's acts remain God's acts in every language and culture.

Confounded, they do not agree about how to interpret the event that they have all witnessed together at the same time. Some translate what they hear as babble resulting from a midday drinking binge. Others cannot settle on one interpretation. Even the outpouring of God's spirit at Pentecost requires interpretation. Whenever God interjects or translates God's self into human history, interpretation is required. Theology, exegesis, hermeneutics, and preaching constitute human attempts to translate God-events into human language.

Backwoods Galileans speaking foreign languages attract attention among the other Jews in Jerusalem, both residents and pilgrims celebrating Shavuot. Capturing attention is one thing; making sense is another. The cosmopolitan crowd expresses curiosity and scorn. They clamour for an explanation, for meaning. Peter's entire speech that follows offers his answer to their foundational question, "What does this mean?"

He retrieves Joel's oracle from storage and makes a few alterations so it will be appropriate for the current occasion. He is not correcting or misquoting Joel as much as he is adapting the prophet's old words for new use in new circumstances. Joel's original testimony about God has accumulated new meaning in light of God's deeds through Jesus Christ and his sending of the Spirit.

So, Joel offers a resource by which Peter can answer his audience's question. The oracle allows Peter to:

First, interpret the times. What does Pentecost mean? The gift of God's Spirit

indicates that something new in human history has begun. The times have changed.

Secondly, it allows him to interpret the community created by the Spirit. What does Pentecost mean? The Spirit has come to mark the church – every member of it – as belonging to God and as God's agent in the world. They are God's slaves.

Thirdly, it allows him to interpret the work of the Spirit-filled community. What does Pentecost mean? The foreign languages are not an instance of trickery or mass hysteria. God is at work here, equipping people to communicate about God. The Spirit prompts them to engage in prophecy. The community of faith is a community of prophets.

Peter does not speak of prophecy as predicting the future. Instead, prophecy is truth-telling. It is naming the places and ways where God intervenes or initiates in the world. It is a component of proclaiming the word of God and identifying God's salvation at work. Peter's sermon does more than name the notion of prophecy. It also demonstrates it. We learn what prophecy is by watching him do it.

From Peter's reference to Joel, we see that prophecy speaks to the present time. (Remember, he is answering a very pressing question: "What does this mean?" What's happening now?) But prophecy finds promises and images from the past that allow it to speak as it does. It draws from prior testimony about God's activity or scripture. It also uses ideas and promises that point toward the future, for all of Pentecost and its prophetic message points toward the day of the Lord and the salvation God will ultimately accomplish.

The rest of Peter's sermon does similar things. It looks to scripture and the story of Jesus to show that Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation provide the basis for the outpouring of the Spirit. Peter is at pains to show that the events of the day point beyond themselves to reveal that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, and that God's salvation is at hand. This is what prophets do; they show how present events might connect to God and God's purposes.

Prophecy carries a lot of semantic baggage among us, thanks to "prophecy seminars", documentaries about Nostradamus, and other foolish ideas. Peter makes sense of the crowd's experience. He offers a theological basis for what the crowd is experiencing, and for what they must do to share in the salvation God has prepared.

Note that Peter is not primarily an interpreter of scripture. First and foremost he is an interpreter of the present time and the gospel. Scripture becomes helpful as a means by which he makes sense of those things. Peter also refers to a community full of visionaries and dreamers. He is not the only one equipped to make meaning. That work belongs to all who receive the Spirit, both then and now. Our churchly Pentecost observances fail if they create nostalgia instead of equipping interpreters or prophets.

This is the central importance of Pentecost: the Spirit's transformation of the church into a community of prophets. The community that had gathered in Jesus' name is now made something that they were not before: prophets of God's word, messengers of the good news of Jesus, good reasons for them to rejoice and be

thankful.

Paul writes to the Philippians, telling them that we should rejoice in all the goodness that is found in God and in his blessings which include the gift of the Holy Spirit. Live in the spirit of gentleness, which provides a stark contrast to the harsh, acrimonious, and sometimes cruel values that are the norms of the ethos of our culture. The character of Christ is our prime example of gentleness. He tells them to hold on to the nearness of God. The Lord's nearness will encourage and strengthen you as you step out on the journey of discipleship and prophecy. Pray with thankfulness for God's goodness, presence, listening ear and the sending of the Holy spirit. God's peace is our guard. The wonderful, mysterious peace of God will guard and keep safe our hearts and minds.

What might it look like for us to trust that the blowing, swirling, burning, life-giving power of the Spirit is present among us, dancing upon our heads, and stirring up a new thing in our midst? Rejoice! Be Gentle! Do not worry! Make your requests to God! The peace of God will always guard you! Remember, the Lord is near!

Amen.