

Acts 2:1-21

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.’

PRESENT TENSE FAITH

Today is Pentecost. Long ago Jews from every nation on earth gathered to remember among other things the gift of the first five books of the Bible (thus the name for the festival: penta=five). But, celebration of the past was interrupted.

There was a sound like a “mighty wind” that came “down from heaven.” And things have never been the same since. Everyone was filled with the Spirit and spoke the language of faith, a language that brought people together and enabled them to understand the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The people of God gathered to remember the past, but the Holy Spirit thrust them into the future with the force of a mighty wind and tongues as of fire.

Sometimes when we talk about what we believe we do it in an academic passive way. For example, it is one thing to say, “I believe there is a God.” But, it is quite another thing to say, “I believe God walks with me every step of the way.”

I told my Bible study I have a sermon title that only an English teacher could love, “Present Tense Faith”. When I was learning to write one of my teachers insisted that we avoid the passive tense. She wanted us to write simple, powerful sentences in the present tense. Her advice helps me write better sentences every day.

In a similar way, the Holy Spirit helps us live our faith in the present tense. The Holy Spirit turns a story about the past into a powerful present experience.

Before I read the Scripture or preach each Sunday, I have a brief prayer, the prayer for illumination. We say (in essence) in this prayer, “Holy Spirit come. We can’t understand these stories of faith and salvation without your help. Shed light on this passage. Illumine us.” We want more than good advice. We want good news. We want to experience the power of God.

A MIRACLE OF UNDERSTANDING

In our lesson for today, all the “preachers” came from Galilee. But, the “congregation” came from all over the world. How could the disciples preach the good news so that everyone could understand? The Holy Spirit enabled everyone to understand. Amazingly, people from all over the world heard the gospel in their own language. It was a miracle of understanding.

The Bible is an ancient book. The languages of the Bible are different from our own. The culture and worldview of the Bible is quite different from our culture and worldview. Certainly we try to overcome that by study, and study is important.

But, hearing the gospel requires more than study. It requires faith. When we say something like, “That passage really spoke to me” that is the work of the Spirit.

In the Bible we learn that “All Scripture is inspired by God”. (2 Timothy 3:16) The word literally means, “God breathed”. The Spirit is the breath of God. The Spirit produces Scripture, and the Spirit enables us to hear God’s Word. This miracle of understanding, this miracle that enables us to call upon the name of the Lord and be saved happens every day.

In that sense, Pentecost is more than a once a year celebration. Pentecost is an ever-present possibility.

We are blinded by sin and self-interest. The failures of the past fill us with guilt, and our fears about the future fill us with anxiety.

But, faith is present tense. Faith redeems us from the failures of the past and points us toward the hope of God’s future. Faith is not something that we do. Faith is something that God does in our hearts right now.

A NEW CREATION

Peter interpreted the miracle of Pentecost by quoting the prophet Joel. This was the Day of the Lord. Pentecost was that day when everyone, young and old dreamed God’s dream. Pentecost was that day when heaven came down and the glory of God filled the earth.

But, not everyone was impressed. In response to the coming of the Spirit, some people said, “These guys are drunk on new wine.” The cynical man or woman always thinks that good news is too good to be true. And so he or she looks for a different explanation for the coming of the Spirit.

Sadly, this is true today of many Christians. We cynically ignore or dismiss the signs of the Spirit. We relegate the power of God to the distant past. But, faith must have a here and now component to be true faith. Faith must be alive. Faith means applying the Scripture to our lives today.

We Presbyterians talk about doing everything “decently and in order”. Today’s lesson reminds us that sometimes things happen in God’s kingdom that are not so orderly. Sometimes God brings disorder and surprise to our one-dimensional and seemingly predictable world.

The wind of the Spirit often tears down the old way of life so that a new way of life can begin. Long ago the wind of God’s Spirit did just that. And this new creation that we now call the church enabled the gospel to spread throughout the ancient world.

But, some attributed all the commotion to the effects of new wine. In a sense they were right you know. These disciples were drunk on new wine.

But, it was not the fruit of the vine that made them drunk. They were intoxicated by the power of the Spirit.

They were the first fruits of those who would follow the risen Jesus. The Spirit of the risen Christ had now come to reside in them. And this power changed frightened disciples into bold messengers of the faith.

Remember Jesus said that you couldn’t put new wine in old wineskins. The fermentation process would cause the old wineskins to leak. New wine required new wineskins.

And sometimes the coming of God’s Spirit requires us to look at things in a new way. The coming of God’s Spirit enables us to understand how the Scripture is being fulfilled today. The coming of God’s Spirit makes the words of the prophet take on a present urgency.

Our world is transformed when God’s Spirit comes to town.

I think that is how the apocalyptic imagery of Joel’s passage should be interpreted. The signs from the heaven above and the earth below refer to the wonder of this new creation.

They are a way of expressing graphically the possibility that if anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away and the new is come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

As the prophet put it in those days, “... everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

REPENTANCE

Oddly enough many think our job in the church is to keep things the same. But, this passage suggests that the Holy Spirit is all about change. And that change begins with changed hearts. When men and women call upon God they are saved.

The Bible speaks about this change most often by using the word repentance. Repentance means to be turned around, to be transformed.

A bit later in the second chapter of Acts Peter completes his sermon that he begins in our lesson for today. The people learn that they have been responsible in part for the crucifixion of God's Son, Jesus, and they are overwhelmed by this revelation. They cry out in despair, "What must we do?"

And Peter replies, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that you may have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

I believe that repentance, turning from our selves and turning toward God is a lifelong process. We never get so good at worshipping and serving God that we outgrow the need for repentance.

Jesus said that daily we are to deny our selves, take up our cross and follow him. That means daily we make room for the coming of the Spirit by getting rid of those things that we don't really need. We lay down the burdens of the world so that we can take up the burdens that Jesus would have us carry.

So, if you are going through a dry spell spiritually, maybe there is something that you need to lay down. And if you are going through a spiritual drought, maybe there is something that you need to pick up, God's Word as revealed in his Son Jesus.

God's Word is a means of grace. God's Word reveals God's will and is accompanied by the power of the Spirit.

PASSING THE PEACE

A minister who preaches in storefront churches filled with people who live on the fringes of society said that before he asks everyone to greet one another and share the peace of Christ he says something like the following,

"When the Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples they were hiding upstairs in a locked room. These friends who knew him best had betrayed him. They had

pretended they didn't know him. They ran away when they arrested him. They hid when they killed him.

They were frightened and ashamed.

He appeared among them and greeted them. He didn't say, 'What happened? Where were you? Who messed up?'

No, he greeted them saying, 'Peace.'"

The pastor said that the first time he used these words a woman who was addicted to heroin whispered, "That was the first time in so many years that I felt like I was good enough to be part of this." Over and over again the people shyly approached and let him know that he must keep saying this.

Heaven has come to us, and we are indeed saved by this message of grace and hope. But, the message is not just for us. We are given the message so that we might proclaim it to others.

Wherever people are hurting we are called to proclaim this message. Wherever people feel a real sense of guilt and shame we are called to proclaim this message. Wherever people hear from others, "You're not good enough. You're not welcome" we are called to proclaim this message.

We are called by the power of the Spirit to bring heaven down to earth. We are called to say what I proclaim every Sunday morning, "Be at peace. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven."

THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Tom Long in a sermon on this passage asked exactly how did the coming of the Spirit change the church? What gift did the Spirit give the church? Did the Spirit give the church the gift of power or excitement? Indeed the experience of Pentecost was powerful and exciting.

But, according to Tom that was not the gift.

The gift of the Spirit was the gift of something to say. The disciples are given a Word to speak in world filled with unspeakable tragedy. The church is called to proclaim a Word of hope to the hopeless. Disciples who were afraid to say anything now stood up and spoke openly about God's grace and forgiveness.

That's the gift of the Spirit, the Word of God as revealed in Jesus. And even those who participated in killing God's Son are given a chance to change.

The Spirit gave the church a Word that speaks to young and old alike. The Spirit gave the church a Word of hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. The Spirit gave the church a Word that tells us that in the resurrection of Christ we have hope that death and pain will be no more.

HOPE FOR THE DYING

Many years ago Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross was writing her famous book on death and dying. She talked with dying patients in the hospital trying to find out what they felt and thought as they faced death.

In one hospital she noticed a remarkable pattern. Some patients would be calm, at peace and tranquil. And they all had one thing in common; a certain hospital orderly had cleaned the patient's room.

One day Dr. Ross happened to run into this orderly in the hall and asked, "What are you doing with my patients?" The orderly thought she was being reprimanded and replied, "I'm not doing anything with your patients."

But, Dr. Ross responded, "No, you don't understand. This is a good thing. After you go into these patients' rooms they seem at peace. What are you doing with my patients?"

And the orderly said, "I just talk to them. You know I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But, God never abandoned me. I tell them that they aren't alone, that God is with them, and that they don't have to be afraid."

That's present tense faith. That's the gift of Pentecost. God gives us a Word to speak even in the most unspeakable situation. God give us a word of good news and hope that is unlike any other word.

God in Christ loves us too much to leave us alone.

Christ will not leave His disciples "desolate" as John puts it in his Gospel. (John 14:18) Jesus promised his disciples if they would wait for Him, He would send His Holy Spirit to be with them.

Today this little band of believers sees that promise fulfilled. The rushing wind and the tongues of fire are symbolic of the Spirit's presence.

And the wind still blows and the flame still burns.

The gift of the Holy Spirit has come upon us as well. When we were baptized, the water poured on our head was the outward sign of that gift. It was an outward sign of an inward and spiritual work. The Spirit of Christ has been give to each of us.

A STORY TO TELL AND A JOB TO DO

So what does this mean? If the Spirit is still active today in our lives, what are the implications?

It means that we have a story to tell. It means that we too are witnesses to the grace and glory of God as revealed in Jesus. We witness by what we do and by what we say. We are witnesses to God's grace and God's glory by how we treat each other.

Indeed, as we will see next week, this was the greatest reason people became Christians. People saw in the lives of those first Christians something that they wanted.

Those Christians loved and served each other. Those Christians cared for each other's needs. They ate together and worshipped together. Those Christians had a Word of eternal hope to proclaim and they practiced what they preached by the power of the Spirit.

A minister told of two older women who began a ministry in one of the local jails for youthful offenders. They visit twice a week and help inmates learn how to read. They also make sure that every man's birthday is celebrated with a cake provided by the local church.

One of the women said, "I have really surprised myself. I've always been a rather shy person, not the type to venture out and try new things. Can you believe what God has done through someone like me?"

I wonder. What could God do through someone like you or someone like me? The powerful wind of the Spirit is still blowing. And that still changes everything. May you catch the Spirit so that you might know faith in the present tense.

Amen.