

“Preaching with Power”

In our theology, Pentecost is charged with surprising drama and significance. While the moment in the manger is delicate and the morning of the empty tomb is marked with confusion and disbelief, Pentecost comes in with a bang. With a rushing noise and a mighty wind, tongues as of flame, an outpouring of languages of the whole Roman world spoken by unlearned Galilean laborers mistaken for colorful inebriates, and a powerful impromptu sermon by their head fisherman, the age of the Spirit is off and running. In some circles, it is considered the “birthday of the church.”

The arrival of the Holy Spirit in our passage today, Acts 2:1-21, had been predicted by John the Baptist (Luke 3:16) and by the risen Jesus (Acts 1:4-5). The reception of God’s spirit enables the community to carry an inspired word about God’s risen Messiah to the entire household of Israel. Although Israel is the original audience for the message, in the remaining chapters of Acts the message will be taken to other parts of the world and to the Gentiles. Pentecost is just the beginning.

There are several reasons why today’s passage is so important. First, the importance Jesus gives to the Spirit’s role in his final instructions to the disciples. This is the day the believers have been instructed to wait for. Second, the passage’s

highly evocative description. Third, the way certain faith traditions and religious movements have drawn on the passage to warrant their religious experience and theological contribution. Fourth, the way this text frames and informs the church's observance of the Pentecost season when believers gather together in a heightened expectation of being renewed and redeemed by the power of God's spirit.

Pentecost was a day long harvest festival observed by Jews and was more commonly known as the "Feast of Weeks." It was scheduled fifty days following Passover. It was usually attended by many, because it generally took place in June and the weather was good. Luke's staging of the Spirit's outpouring and miracle of tongues may be explained in part by the subsequent list of nations since Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage feasts when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the guidance of God toward the nation.

One can also tie the timing of Pentecost to what is known as the Sinai theophany and the giving of the Torah (Exodus 19:16-19; Deut. 5:4-5). The giving of the Torah to Moses occurred roughly fifty days after the Passover as an act of covenant renewal and was mediated through Moses. Christian interpreters posit that a new dispensation happened at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit through the Messiah mediated a new covenant with Israel.

Luke uses familiar Old Testament symbols of theophany, similar to Moses' experience on Sinai (fire, sound, speech) to describe the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost. Therefore, considering the history, the reader of Acts is hardly surprised that the promised Spirit arrives from heaven with special effects, sounding like a "violent wind" and appearing like "tongues of fire." The image here is to create a vivid impression of the Spirit's presence among the community of the Lord's disciples as the distinguishing mark. It is almost like the starting gun of a race. The church's mission can and must begin!

With "tongues of fire," the gift of speaking in foreign languages by the Spirit enables the community, especially the Apostles, to testify publicly to Israel. This goes to the provocative and powerful way the Gospel is boldly preached. "Fire" was used by the Jewish writers of that day to show that the spirit of prophecy awakened and elevated the prophet's ability to think, reason, and speak.

The gift of tongues here should not be confused with "the gift of tongues" that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 12-14. What Paul writes about is a gift given only to some to edify the entire congregation and for the purposes of worship and Christian formation. At Pentecost, with the ability to speak in other languages the community is filled with the Spirit to express the works of God and Jesus in intelligible and intelligent tongues to all who have gathered.

We read that “all were filled with the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit gives extraordinary insight to those it fills. The prophet who is filled with the Spirit of prophecy is able to set aside the processes of human intellect, which are always subject to guesswork, and replace them with true knowledge of a divinely inspired intellect. The practical result, according to the historian Philo, is that the Spirit-filled prophet is given an enriched capacity to interpret scriptures. The biblical words inspired by the Spirit are rendered accurately and with keen insight into the human condition by the power of the same Spirit.

In our passage today, we are introduced to the first Christian preaching. When Peter addresses the crowd, he engages in what is known as *kerugma*. This literally means a herald’s announcement and is the plain statement of the facts of the Christian message which, as the early preachers saw it, there can be no argument and of which there can be no denial. The Book of Acts tells of the proclamation of the facts of the gospel to those who have never heard them before. This *kerugma* follows a pattern which repeats itself over and over again all over the New Testament.

The commentator William Barclay discusses five main points about the preaching in the Book of Acts. First, there is the proof that Jesus, and all that happened to Jesus, is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In modern times

less and less stress has been made on the fulfillment of prophecy. But the stress of early preaching on prophecy conserves and lays down one great truth. It lays down the great truth that history is not haphazard; that it is not a knotless thread; but that there is a meaning and sense and a moral law at work in the universe. To believe in the possibility of prophecy is to believe that God is in control and that He is working out His purposes.

The second point is that in Jesus the Messiah has come, the Messianic prophecies are fulfilled and the New Age has dawned. The early Church had a tremendous sense that Jesus was the hinge of all history; that with His coming, eternity had invaded time and God had entered the human arena; and that, therefore, life and the world could never be the same again. With the coming of Jesus something crucial and all-affecting had emerged.

The third thing to understand is that the early preaching was that Jesus had taught and worked miracles, that He had been crucified, that He had been raised from the dead and was now at the right hand of God. The early Church was quite sure that the whole Christian religion had an historical basis, that it was based on the earthly life of Christ, and that the story of that life must be told. They were certain that earthly life and death were not the end but after them came the resurrection. Jesus was someone they had met and knew and experienced. He was

not a figure in a book to them. He was a living presence to them, alive for evermore.

The fourth point is that the early preachers went on to insist that Jesus would return again in glory to establish his kingdom on earth. In other words, the early Church believed intensely and passionately in the Second Coming. At its core, this belief conserves one great truth-the truth that history is going somewhere, that someday, some time, there will be a consummation of history.

Finally, the preaching finished with the statement that in Jesus alone is salvation, that he who believes on Him will receive the Holy Spirit, and will have eternal life. As one reads through Peter's sermon, one sees as a whole how these five strands are woven into it. Peter preaches to them to repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The preaching is so powerful that some three thousand people were added to the congregation that day.

So, what does Pentecost mean to us today? It tells us that God has given us the Holy Spirit to give us the power to preach and teach. We know from the story today that the Gospel is boldly preached and taught. We understand that the Spirit gives us great insight into the human condition. We have firsthand accounts of the disciples who preached who had personal experience that Jesus was a living person and that gives us confidence to teach that Jesus is the only way of salvation.