

The Message of Pentecost

Acts 2:14-41

John Breon

The first Christian Pentecost featured wild sounds and sights: The sound of a violent wind and then fire appearing above each disciple. The followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began speaking. In a variety of languages, they told about God's deeds of power, the wonderful things God had done in Jesus. All this commotion drew a crowd. Some people were amazed and some scoffed, accusing the disciples of being drunk. This provided an opening for Jesus' newly empowered followers to explain what was going on.

One of the disciples stood up and addressed the crowd. If you had just read the Gospels, I wonder if you could predict which disciple became the church's spokesman. Jesus had been crucified in Jerusalem just a little over a month earlier. Now *Simon Peter*, the one who denied even knowing Jesus when Jesus was on trial for his life, stands up in Jerusalem and proclaims Jesus. Who would have guessed? This is an example of amazing things the Holy Spirit can do.

Peter tells the crowd, "No, we're not drunk! It's too early in the day for that. What's happening is that God's promises through the prophets are being fulfilled." Then he tells them about those promises and their fulfillment in Jesus. It's just as Jesus had said: "When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

If we want to be witnesses (and it's really not an option), we need the power of the Holy Spirit. The first gift the Spirit gives here is the gift of speech, of proclamation. That Spirit-enabled proclamation took the gospel public and attracted people to Christ. Luke shows that the outpouring of the Spirit is not inward and private. There's wind and fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion and public debate. The Holy Spirit empowers the church to "go public" with the good news, to attract a crowd, and to have something to say worth hearing and responding to. "A new wind is set loose upon the earth, provoking a storm of wrath and confusion for some, a fresh breath of

hope and empowerment for others” (Will Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

I was first attracted to the idea of being filled with the Spirit when I saw the quality and boldness of the witness of some people I met. I’d discovered that witnessing—telling others about Jesus—is something God expects, something Christians do. But I wasn’t sure how to do it and I held back. Then I met some guys who talked openly and freely about Jesus. And their witness seemed to be consistent with their living and caring. The source of their witness was the Holy Spirit overflowing in their lives and spilling out on others.

I wanted that. And when I asked God to fill me with his Spirit, I got it. Not long after that, I began to share in various devotional meetings. That led to an invitation to preach my first sermon in a little country church when I was fourteen. It felt like that’s where I belonged. Through high school I preached at youth Sundays in my home church and at other times in country churches around my hometown. I went to college to study theology and prepare for seminary. My witness has generally taken the form of more public proclamation. But you allow God to work through your personality, your talents and gifts, in your sphere of influence.

What was the message those first Christians announced? What’s the heart of the good news? What do we tell people when they’re curious about God and Jesus and salvation and Christian faith?

C. H. Dodd was a New Testament scholar in England. Decades ago, he published a study of the early church’s preaching. In Acts 2-4, there are four sermons or speeches by Peter. Later in Acts, there are several other “missionary speeches.” Examining these sermons, Dodd outlined the early Christian proclamation this way:

- The age of fulfillment has dawned.
- This has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God, as Messianic head of the new Israel.

- The Holy Spirit in the Church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.
- The Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ.
- There's an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of "salvation." (C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* 21-23)

These are essential elements of Christian faith and proclamation.

The time has come. God's promises are being fulfilled. Jesus' followers ransacked the Scriptures as they tried to understand who Jesus was and what he had done and as they came to grips with what they were experiencing. Peter here cites the writing of the prophet Joel along with a couple of Psalms. Other passages of Scripture also inform his message.

The Holy Spirit and Scripture are vital for showing the way of salvation—both how to receive it and how to live in it. The Holy Spirit inspires Scripture and inspires our understanding of it.

The Jewish people in the first century read their Scriptures, looking for hope and direction. They expected that God would act to fulfill God's promises in their time. So when Peter announces that the Pentecost experience is what the prophet Joel was talking about, they were ready to hear what he had to say.

God's promise was, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." The Spirit's activity would no longer be limited to enabling individual leaders to do specific tasks. God's Spirit is now active in all kinds of people, in all kinds of places. Men and women, young and old, people near and far can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and speak as the Spirit inspires and empowers them.

Can you believe God's promises are for you? Can you believe God wants to empower you to serve and to witness? Wherever God calls you, God provides the motivation, the power, the gifts needed to do what God wants done.

Not only are old promises being fulfilled, but new promises are being made. Later, Peter says that when we repent and believe we receive

forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then he says, "This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39).

God's promises, God's action, the work of the Holy Spirit, our salvation and the fulfillment of our lives all center on Jesus. Peter reminds the people in Jerusalem about the miracles, wonders, and signs God did through Jesus. Those amazing things Jesus did showed the power and presence of God's kingdom. They were evidence that God was at work to save and restore his people. Of course, some people didn't see Jesus' miracles as evidence. They sometimes said he was doing those mighty works not by God's power, but by the power of Satan.

Those who rejected Jesus as speaking and acting for God put him to death. Jesus' crucifixion was in God's plan, and yet people carried it out. The Jewish leaders and people, along with the Romans, executed Jesus by nailing him to a cross. But God was carrying out his purpose and fulfilling his promises through Jesus' death.

Then God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. This is the key, this is vital. Luke emphasizes the importance of Jesus' resurrection by repeating what happened: God raised Jesus; God freed Jesus from death; death could not hold Jesus. Death, and all the enemies of God's kingdom, of life with God, were defeated when God raised Jesus from the dead.

Through the resurrection and then the ascension of Jesus, God has exalted him. "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (v. 36). Jesus rules as the chosen and anointed one of God. Jesus rules as Lord of all. In the Old Testament, God was revealed as "LORD." To call Jesus "Lord" identifies him with the LORD God of Israel. Jesus is truly God with us. It took the church a while to explain what that means—and we're still at it. But when we say, "Jesus is Lord," we're announcing that God is in Jesus, revealing himself through Jesus, and that Jesus is God with us in action, bringing salvation and life.

Peter says to the crowd, "Exalted to the right hand of God—the place of highest glory and honor—Jesus has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and Jesus has poured out what you now see and hear" (v. 33). The Holy Spirit is God present and active. The Holy Spirit is the

continuing presence of Jesus in and among his people. The gift of the Spirit, and all the signs and wonders and effects of the Spirit's work come from God. This is how God is with us and at work in us.

The Holy Spirit's present work continues until the final day, the completion of God's purpose, the fulfillment of all God's promises. Peter announces that the "last days" have begun (v. 17). What Jesus ushered in through his ministry, death, resurrection, and giving the Holy Spirit was the *beginning* of the last days. While we live in those days, we still wait for the *last* of the last days. The day will come when God will put all of Jesus' enemies under his feet (v. 35). When Jesus returns, this era will end and God's kingdom will come in all its fullness. Righteousness and peace will flood the earth. God will make all things new and those who are in Christ will be resurrected to live in God's glorious presence forever. This is clearer in another sermon of Peter's where he says about Jesus, "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (3:21).

So Peter claims that what's happening is the fulfillment of prophecy. He tells this Jerusalem crowd that Jesus, whom they crucified, has been raised from death and exalted by God. He announces that God's promised kingdom is coming and being fulfilled in Jesus. He says that Jesus, the exalted Messiah, is the one who has poured out the Holy Spirit whose presence is evident in the disciples. And he declares that someday God will finish what he's started when Jesus returns.

In response to Peter's inspired message, the people were cut to the heart. Their hearts were broken open by the gospel. And they asked, "What should we do?" I hope when we hear the gospel that our hearts are opened. I hope the Holy Spirit works through the message to stir your heart and lead you to ask, "What am I going to do about it?" I realize that often I just lay out the message and then trust you to connect the dots for yourself. I can't think for you or decide for you. But sometimes we need help to respond to God's call. We can encourage each other. We can pray for each other. I can invite you to respond to God, to seek the Lord, to be open to the Spirit.

Think about it like this: Imagine you're sliding down a steep slope—on a sled or skis or something like that. Suddenly you realize you're heading for a sheer drop. You're going faster and faster toward it. The slope is too steep for you to slow down, much less stop, turn around and go back up out of danger. What are you going to do?

It may well be there's nothing you can do. You need to be rescued. You need someone to stand in the way, someone who's managed to get a fixed foothold on the slope, and who will catch you, stop you, and help you to safety. And if you're lucky enough to see someone offering to do that for you, you'd have to steer toward them and be ready for the shock of a sudden stop. That'd be better than plunging over a cliff.

Jesus had been warning people for a long time that they were in danger of accelerating toward a cliff. He put himself in the way to stop their headlong plunge into disaster. That's what the cross was about.

Now, following Jesus' resurrection, Peter and the others can unpack the meaning of the crucifixion for the benefit of the crowds. This "crooked generation," as Peter calls it, is heading for disaster, but Jesus stands in the way and can stop them from falling over the cliff. "Be rescued," he says. Let God rescue you. Let Jesus rescue you.

How do we steer toward Jesus? How does he catch us, stop us, and rescue us? Peter tells the people to repent—that is, feel sorrow for your sin and the separation it causes, then change your mind and your direction. Turn back. And be baptized as a sign of submission to God, as a symbol of cleansing from sin, and as initiation into the church, the community of the Holy Spirit. Then, he says, you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You need to allow Jesus to get hold of you and save you from the consequences of the way you were going—that's the forgiveness of sins. And you need to allow Jesus to give you new energy to go in the right way instead—that's the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What God has promised for the ultimate future has come forward to meet us in Jesus Christ. We should expect signs of that future to appear in the present. And, whenever we are in a mess, of whatever sort and for whatever reason, we should remember this: we are 'turn-

back-and-be-rescued' people. We are 'repent-and-be-baptized' people. We have the right, the birthright, to cash in that promise at any place and any time. No wonder 3,000 people signed up that very day. (N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, Part 1, 40-43)

About 3000 people did accept the message, they did repent and believe and were baptized. They received the gift of the Holy Spirit—God himself living in them. The gift offered to those people in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago is offered to us today. If we will repent and believe, the Holy Spirit will rush into our lives, cleansing and purifying us, giving us new life and power, filling us with love and giving us gifts to enable us to proclaim Jesus and minister in his name.