

Sunday, June 5, 2022 – “Spirited Prophets”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Acts 2:1-21

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Acts 2:1-21 (*Common English Bible*).

¹When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁵There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. ⁷They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?” ⁸How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” ¹²They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, “What does this mean?” ¹³Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”

¹⁴Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! ¹⁵These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! ¹⁶Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷*In the last days, God says,*

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young will see visions.

Your elders will dream dreams.

¹⁸*Even upon my servants, men and women,*

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

¹⁹*I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above*

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.

²⁰*The sun will be changed into darkness,*

and the moon will be changed into blood,

before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.

²¹*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*

This Sunday the Church remembers Pentecost, the feast that occurs in Jerusalem fifty days after Passover in the Jewish calendar. The Church actually appropriates this Jewish feast. Luke has just related the story of Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:1-12, which may be compared with Luke 24:50-53). We’ve also heard about the gathering of Jesus’ 120 followers in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15), and the designation of Matthias as a replacement apostle for Judas (Acts 1:16-26). All these events prepare us for the Pentecost narrative, which will launch all the rest of the action in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles.

What Luke reports is not so much the birth of the Church but rather the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of all the believers to bear witness to the “ends of the earth,” as was promised in Acts 1:8. The dramatic descent of the Spirit at Pentecost is immediately followed by Peter’s interpretation (sermon) of the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 2:22-36). If you

don't believe that the empowering Holy Spirit has descended, thereby instigating Peter's courageous witness, then how do you explain that Peter, who cowered and denied Jesus when Jesus was arrested, is now speaking up for the Risen Christ before a disbelieving mob? And what a fruitful response to Peter's speech! About three thousand are converted (read Acts 2:37-43). Okay, maybe three thousand converts involves a bit of numerical exaggeration on Luke's part. Maybe what Luke's trying to convey is that the Holy Spirit converted a lot of people.

Our Pentecost lesson begins with the 120 gathered (Acts 2:1; see also, Acts 1:15). The Spirit descends like the sound of a rushing wind, tongues of fire resting on each, and the gift of the ability to speak in other languages (Acts 2:2-4). We are immediately given the reaction of outsiders to this wild event (Acts 2:5-13). The lectionary selection ends nine verses into Peter's address to the outsiders, with a quotation from the prophet Joel.

The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is described as "a violent wind" in Acts 2:2-4 that sweeps down suddenly (in Greek, *aphno*), violently (*biaias*) upon the assembled believers. Tongues of fire settle on every head (Acts 2:3). Next, those upon whom the Spirit has settled begin to speak in "other languages." (Acts 2:4). Note, that unlike other places in Luke's Gospel and Acts, no distinction is made between male and female believers; the Spirit is given to all. They are speaking in various languages, not the spiritual language that the Apostle Paul calls *glossolalia* that causes problems for some of Paul's congregations, such as in 1 Corinthians, Chapters 12-14.

Also note that this Spirit moment occurs among "devout Jews," not yet among Gentiles. These devout ones are not Pentecost pilgrims; they are culturally diverse immigrants to Jerusalem (Acts 2:5) who have immigrated from all over (Acts 2:9-11). And so, who are the first to receive the Spirit and be brought into the incendiary community of the Church? They are immigrants with different languages and cultures. The Holy Spirit uses the apostles' preaching to produce a bund of other multinational prophets, spokespeople for God.

How can we proclaim Pentecost as that time when God's disruptive, prophetic speech explodes into all the world, spoken by Spirit-filled women, men, youth and children, servants who have all become servants of the Word? As baptized members of the Church, we are also called to prophets, to speak up and speak out for God's love and justice for all people.

In light of the recent Buffalo shooting by a white supremacist, the Church must speak up and speak out against all forms of racism. And that means that when we hear someone say something that is racist, we are called to speak up, "Wait a minute! Do you realize that what you just said is prejudice?" It also means that when we witness someone being discriminated against by any institution, private or public, we have a Christian duty to write letters of objection, to assemble for a peaceful protest, and to work in any way we can to promote justice for all.

Some may think that taking such actions is to bring politics into religion. And yet, Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, quotes Joel and the prophet's threatening Day of the Lord with all its blood, smoke, fire, and a solar eclipse (Acts 2:19-20; Joel 2:30-31). Moreover, I'm impressed that the Pentecostal descent of the Spirit brought fear and bewilderment rather than joy and receptive celebration. We're not reading an account of a pleasant descent of a heavenly dove. It's

violent wind, shaking of the foundations, and fire, a climactic event whereby the Church is born (Acts 2:41-47).

I once asked an African-American pastor, “Why does Pentecostal preaching tend to get loud and raucous?” He replied, “Because my people have been told so often, for so long, that we ought to be seen and not heard, invisible and quiet. We are to stand politely on the margins while the majority culture does its thing. The church gathers my people and enables them to strut and shout, to stand up and be heard.”

Those first followers of the Risen Christ were accused of “disturbing the peace throughout the empire” (Acts 17:6). We are called to do the same. When we were baptized, whether we can remember it or not, we were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why were we given this powerful, intimate presence of God? So that we could speak up and speak out for God. In our baptism, in receiving the Holy Spirit, all of us were ordained as one of God’s spirited prophets. Will we go forth and talk and act like we believe it?

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Greg Rupright