

What Does This Mean? —Rev. Denise Stone

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 6-9-19

Today is Pentecost. Pentecost is the day that we celebrate the birth of the Christian church – by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost, however, is not just a Christian celebration. It has its roots in the Jewish faith. Pentecost is a Jewish celebration that takes place 50 days after Passover. This celebration marked the giving of the Torah and was also the time of giving the first fruits to the temple.

One of the authors I read this week said that “the gathered disciples would already be celebrating God’s gifts, unawares that another gift was coming. This new gift of mother tongue’s turned them out word, toward those outside their movement.”ⁱ

As most of you know, I grew up as a Southern Baptist. I don’t remember ever hearing the word Pentecost, much less celebrating it. My suspicion is it was too “Catholic.” I did not know about Pentecost as a celebration or as worship or remembrance until much later in my life.

We have the tendency to overlook the Holy Spirit's role in our Christianity. We are comfortable with God the father / God the Creator; and we are comfortable with God the son / God the Savior. But we are not that were comfortable with God the Holy Spirit / God the comforter / God the counselor / God the motivator.

Bear in mind that it wasn't just the 11 disciples and Matthias who received the gift of the Holy Spirit on that day. It was all of the believers that were gathered. And that gift didn't stop there. The Holy Spirit was completely involved in the development of the early church.

Over the next 6 weeks we're going to be looking at the movement - the work of the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit was involved in the spread of the good news of Jesus. And, hopefully, by the time we are finished we will have a better understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church, in our lives and our worship of God and in our conveying to other people our faith in Jesus Christ.

Traditionally we wear red on Pentecost as a visual reminder of the flame of the Holy Spirit that came and "lighted" or sat on each of the believers in the house on that day. The Holy Spirit is described for

us as a sound like the rush of a violent wind; and as tongues as of fire. We are told that all of those gathered were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability.

We are not talking about nonsense syllables we're talking about actual languages that people spoke.

As was often the case in Jerusalem whenever there was a Jewish festival people from all over the known world would come to Jerusalem to celebrate that festival people who were Jewish as well as people who were gentiles, but followers / believers in Judaism. The followers were gifted so that the visitors to Jerusalem could understand the message of Jesus.

The people that were gathered in Jerusalem heard the commotion. They heard the followers of Christ speaking in their native languages. Can you imagine what that felt like?

The same author mentioned a moment ago also talked about an experience she had overseas.ⁱⁱ She was standing on a train platform in Russia hearing people speak in the language she did not understand. And yet from the other end of the

platform she heard someone speaking American English and she described it is like a homing beacon for her. The language was heard clearly over the others standing around talking. It pulled her to those people because she understood what they were saying in her own native language.

The story of the Holy Spirit coming on this particular day takes up only 4 verses of a larger passage. Starting in verse 5 we hear a description of who was there in the crowd and how they reacted to what they were seeing and hearing.

In verse 12 these Jewish travelers from different places and speaking different languages, the text says all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “what does this mean?”

Verse 13 has an aside “but others sneered and said they are filled with new wine.” Know that there will always be detractors from whatever you’re doing, especially when it’s about your faith. Peter, however, didn’t allow the hecklers to override the genuine question that the people had – “What does this mean?”

That is the same question that we need to have when we look at this text, actually when we look at

any text. We should always ask “what does this mean?” We should ask what does this text, the story, this event tell us about who God is and what it is that we are supposed to do.

One of the things I found most interesting about this entire passage looking at verses 1 through 42 is in verse 12 the people ask “what does this mean” and from verse 14 through 36 Peter gives them an answer. Peter uses the prophet Joel to explaining what was happening and then who Jesus was and is.

We start in first 12 with the question of the people what does this mean and we go through Peter sermon and get to verse 37 and the same people ask “what then should we do?”

What does this mean and what should we do?

It is important that we look at Peter’s sermon for those answers. Peter takes the prophecy that is found in Joel and adapts it to explain the current situation.

As I said earlier, it wasn’t just the 11 disciples plus Matthias who received the gift of the Holy Spirit on that day it was all of the believers that were gathered

and it didn't stop there. The Holy Spirit was involved in the spread of the church and the spread of the good news.

Peter, in quoting the prophet Joel, says '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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.'

I want to digress for just a moment. We might get hung up on the word prophesy because of current usage of the word as well as studies and TV programs about Nostradamus and his prophecies, and in the prophecies of various cults, etc.

We need to think of prophecy not as future telling but rather truth telling.ⁱⁱⁱ What Peter does in this sermon to the people that are gathered is that he interprets the event of speaking in the native languages through the lens of scripture - specifically through the prophecy from Joel.

Another writer suggested that 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. That transforming Spirit is given to all of them, apparently not just the eleven plus Matthias, but the larger community of 120 which was described in Acts 1:15.”^{iv}

All of us who have accepted Christ and have received the gifts from the Holy Spirit are called to be prophets - to be truth tellers. That means that we need look at current events and things in our lives and our friends’ lives in our families’ lives and look at scripture and interpret what God has to say in those moments.

It is not just the job for your pastor or the preacher down the street. It is every believer’s job to share the good news of Jesus Christ. But that also means that we need to be biblically literate. We need to know what Scripture says - not just what we **think** Scripture says.

When you look at the prophecy from Joel that Peter uses in his sermon, one of the things you’ll notice is

its inclusivity. Men and women, young and old, people from all countries and every ethnicity and language are included in the role or obligation of prophesying – of truth-telling.

In verse 21 the prophet Joel, as spoken by the apostle Peter, says then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. That is followed up in verses 22-24 explaining that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried - but raised up from the dead by the power of God.

Peter doesn't limit his sermon to the prophecy from Joel; he also quotes a psalm of David as further proof of Jesus' resurrection fulfilling Scripture.

In verse 30 Peter says this Jesus whom God raised up – and that all of us are witnesses. Peter brings in his own experience and the experiences of the other disciples and followers of Jesus that Jesus is really resurrected; that he's not dead and buried but rather alive; not a ghost but real and that he now sits on the right hand of God.

So Peter has interpreted the prophecy to explain to the people gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost that Jesus Christ **IS** the Messiah and has been resurrected and sits at the right hand of God.

It is in response to this information that the people ask “what then should we do?” In verse 38 Peter says to the people, “repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promises for you for your children and for all who are far away everyone who the Lord our God calls to him.”

Verse 41 tells us those who welcomed Peter’s message were baptized and that day about 3000 persons were saved. And that they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

One of the authors stated, “Being a disciple of Jesus in this windstorm (the coming of the Holy Spirit) will bring the church, and you along with it, to unexpected places, and unexpected grace. It may only be in retrospect, and with inspired interpretation, that we can look back and recognize the Spirit’s driving wind rather than simply a frighteningly chaotic storm.”^v

That same author concluded his article saying, “In the context of Joel, this passage meant the salvation of Israel and the destruction of those nations that had oppressed it. The surprise of Pentecost is that

the eschatological “last days” do not bring that destruction, but rather bring mission and redemption for the world. Of course, it will take the rest of Acts (and maybe the rest of the church’s history) to fully comprehend what, by God’s grace, is meant by “everyone”. ”^{vi}

The two central questions of this text are, “What does this mean?” and “What then should we do?” We are called to be the carriers of this message to bring the good news of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit given by God the Creator to the world just as the apostles of the early church and the first followers were called to do.

The job has not changed. Pentecost tells us of the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The question I leave for you today is, “Are you willing to go where the Spirit leads?”

ⁱ “Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 by Amy G. Oden.” *Acts 2:1-21 Commentary by Amy G. Oden - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4077.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 by Matt Skinner.” *Acts 2:1-21 Commentary by Matt Skinner - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2837.

^{iv} “Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 by Brian Peterson.” *Acts 2:1-21 Commentary by Brian Peterson - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1630.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.