

Acts 2:1-21 The First Christian Sermon
May 28, 2023

Welcome to Pentecost Sunday. Life is spiritual, and the Spirit brings life. Though the idea of the Spirit of the Lord is common in the Old Testament, and is prominent in the epistles of Paul, which are the earliest known Christian writings, for Christian believers the first experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, as it is described in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which was our reading this morning. In it a scene is described.

The small collection of Christ-followers were in Jerusalem for the Winter Wheat Harvest Festival that always came fifty days after Passover, thus, Pentecost. There were Jewish people from around the world. While there, a dynamic event occurred.

There was a sound like a rushing wind. There was a gifting of the Spirit that was described like tongues of fire, but the greater part of the miracle is that those believers, most of whom were from Galilee and were not very experienced with international encounters, were able to speak in other languages, particularly those of the participants at the festival.

They told the story of Jesus, of his passion and resurrection, what the text calls, the "wonders of God." One might also consider it a miracle of hearing, for several of the festival-goers *heard* . . . Sometimes one can hear a message in one's own language and not understand . . . they heard, and they understood.

For many of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, this event is thought of as a reversal of Babel, in the Book of Genesis, where language was confused, and people could speak, but they could not understand.

There was confusion, nonetheless, which led to the accusation of inebriation; notice how that which is not understood is given an alternative explanation. Thus it led also to the first reported sermon in Christian history. It was a miracle of proclamation. It was Simon Peter who arose to speak.

Let me take just a moment to talk about sermons. A sermon is not an encounter with God, rather it is an announcement of an encounter with God. What Peter did, and to a degree, what all preachers do, sometimes in spite of themselves, is to announce that human beings have been addressed by God, that is, the spiritual dimension of reality has been made known, and summoned us.

The conviction of those most early believers was that the death of Jesus, and the raising of Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit, is about life, how to be alive in this world. It speaks of a belief in a duality of life, that life is material *and* spiritual, and to go a step further, that the material side of life proceeds forth *out of* the spiritual. In the modern age, this idea is disputed, the notion that the material *is* all there is and that there is a natural explanation for everything, has taken root.

The idea of biblical faith is that the material aspects of our existence are not sufficient; that is, they only

pertain to a facet of life that isn't complete, cannot be, and does not explain the fulness of what it means *to be alive*.

Peter begins with a quotation from the prophet Joel and later from a Psalm of David to the effect that, contrary to popular opinion, what they were witnessing was not only not drunkenness, but it was a pouring out of God's Spirit, and a fulfillment of prophecy;

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams

Even on my servants, both men and women
I will pour out my Spirit in those days."

And the psalm that is quoted here is even more interesting. The message is not parochial, or aimed at a particular background, but addresses human beings generally about being alive.

"You have made known to me *the paths of life*.
you fill me with joy in your presence."

We can only claim Peter's message of the Spirit as truth after we have said some other things: namely, that we *do* find meaning in some of the material experiences of life. We find meaning in learning about the world and how it functions; about nature and the human participation in it, about other cultures.

We find meaning in discoveries and accomplishments, especially if they can be said to help others; in being a part of solutions rather than problems, in doing better, growing, helping.

We love to share a good meal and seek fellowship, speaking and being spoken to, listening and being listened to. We find meaning in the passages of life; in family and vocation; Sometimes all these experiences seem like they complete our lives, and we must admit their importance before we say that they do not complete us and therefore lack importance.

The message of the Spirit is that God has made a decision to bring us to being and to reconcile us; that God has made a decision to call us to repentance and to a decision of our own; that God is known in Jesus, and abides with us in the Spirit; means that what we call, "spiritual," is in fact what gives significance to the material aspects of our lives, and without which, ultimately all meaning is lost and life is vain and transitory.

The Holy Spirit *is* the abiding presence of God in our lives and in the life of the church, and in the life of the world. When one thinks of God's abiding presence, one may think of comfort and strength in times of hardship; guidance and direction in confusing circumstances, or when the time in life has come for a decision.

One might also think of the Spirit in terms of conviction, in the sense that we are made sure of our

limitations and sinfulness, and also of God's mercy and grace; and that wherever we are, no matter the situation, through God's Spirit, we are not alone.

For the believer, the presence of the Spirit is accepted by faith and is among those aspects of life that allows clarity of vision, and confidence, and leads to the living of a good life. One can not help but think of the fruit of the Spirit in Paul's letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

What Peter, in the first of countless sermons that would come along afterwards, goes on to present, is that God has been made known in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the Forgiveness of Sin and the gift of the Spirit. And it is all presented to every person as a promise to be believed . . . to be accepted by faith . . .

These are the words that lead to life for us all. We do not think of the Pythagorean Theorem or $E=mc^2$, or DNA, or the complexity of the cardio-pulmonary system, or the fascinating circuitry of the brain, which are all aspects of life. But in the first great sermon we are propelled into the pathway of the Spirit, where life is offered and fills us like the air fills our lungs, and led into the eternity from which we come, and to which we go.

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