***TWO QUESTIONS***

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Text: Acts 2:1-24, 36-42

Ask a child what comes to mind when she thinks of Christmas and you are likely to get a deluge of answers that include presents and *Jingle Bells*, decorated trees and Santa, a manger and baby Jesus. Ask her about Easter and the answer might include a bunny, brightly colored eggs and a risen Jesus. But ask about Pentecost, and often the answer is a perplexed stare. Pentecost isn’t the big holiday that Christmas and Easter are; it is a holy holiday that has not been coopted by our culture as yet, which is probably a good thing but often makes it a little noticed thing.

In the Bible study this week I asked folks what came to mind when they thought of Pentecost. They recalled the disciples gathered in one place and the rush of the mighty wind, tongues of fire and the Spirit filling the house, a sudden burst of languages and the birth of the church, the color red, and the holy city in which this remarkable event took place. Those are the things that often come to mind when we think of this holy holiday if we think of this holy holiday at all, yet all those remembrances are recorded in just the first four verses of this 2nd chapter of Acts. The day did not end there, and neither did Luke’s account of it. In our reading this morning we read 27 of the 38 verses that describe the events of the rest of that first Pentecost day. While those first four verses garner the bulk of attention, and rightly so for it is an extraordinary event, those other 38 verses provide an interpretative lens with which to make sense of the Pentecost event. Two questions raised, not by the disciples but by the people who witnessed what was happening, frame what Luke wants us to consider.

The first question arose when the people began to hear in their own languages words spoken by common Judean fishermen about the power of God. Those who had gathered in Jerusalem were pilgrims from all over the world. Luke runs down the list of peoples from at least fifteen different places that no reader of Scripture really wants to read aloud – places like Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia and Pamphylia. The people from those places knew that these common men could not speak their languages, yet they heard and understood what the disciples were saying. It was hard to believe, and so arose the first question: “What does this mean?” What does it mean that a Parthian Jew and an Arab standing side by side could understand the street preaching of the same Judean fisherman?

That may have been the question on the minds of those in the crowd, but Luke is also speaking for us when he writes those words. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples and send them out to preach in the street? What does it mean that everyone could understand what they said – no matter the language? To put it more bluntly, “What does this Pentecost event mean? Christmas is about incarnation and Easter about resurrection, but Pentecost is about what?

Based upon the common knowledge of a lot of Christians on the street today, the answer is probably, “Not much!” Since so many know so little about it, Pentecost must not mean much! Skeptics in the Jerusalem crowd dismissed it pretty quickly and speak for the skeptics among us when they say, “The disciples are drunk!” They offer a logical explanation for an illogical event, a way to explain it away. Like Thomas Jefferson who excised all the miracles from his Bible, there are a lot of folks who make no room for the miraculous, no room for God to act beyond the limits of the world as we know it. Pentecost is either a tall tale or an event with a common, if somewhat sordid, explanation: They’re drunk! Perhaps you are among those skeptics, because Pentecost is beyond your experience or the limits of your imagination of what could really be. If so, know that you are not alone. As Shirley Guthrie states it:

*People who like things the way they are (or used to be), who benefit from the status quo in church and world, who therefore value stability, permanence, decency and order above everything else - such people are suspicious and afraid of the Holy Spirit, and too much talk about the Spirit makes them nervous and defensive. But people who suffer and see no way out of suffering, who are enslaved and oppressed by their own and others' sinfulness and injustice - they yearn for the coming of the Spirit. For the Spirit is not just the Lord and Giver of life but the Lord and Giver of new life - to individuals, to churches, and to political, social, and economic structures.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

If we are hesitant to assign too much meaning to Pentecost or to embrace the change that it heralded or to believe that it could happen, perhaps it is because we weren’t huddled there in the upper room with the disciples wondering what was going to come next. Perhaps it is because we don’t really like change to begin with, and the coming of the Spirit is all about change. Like the incarnation and resurrection, Pentecost is about a radical new thing God is doing in our midst, and that does not sit particularly well with those of us for whom the status quo is tolerable and for whom change is the equivalent of Voldemort in Harry Potter – that thing not to be named.

Peter was one of those hidden behind the doors in that upper room, and he offers an alternative answer to that question posed by the crowd, “What does this mean?” He suggests it means that God is doing a new thing as God had promised to do through the prophet Joel. He suggests that what Pentecost means is God coming into our midst with a new vision of life, with divine power that inspires words to be spoken and heard. At the heart of those inspired words and that vision for new life is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Many of the Jews gathered there in the streets of Jerusalem did not know Jesus nor had even heard of him, so Peter lays out a brief summary of Jesus’ life and death. He tells of the signs and wonders Jesus performed, proving the power of God at work in him. He describes Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion. He makes the case that Jesus is the messiah of God for whom the Jews had been waiting, and does so with an indictment: “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

What does Pentecost mean? It means that the good news of Jesus can no longer stay behind closed doors. It means that disciples of Jesus are called to go out and share the good news with all the world – with Cretans and Arabs and Parthians and Canadians alike! It means that the good news of Jesus is good news for all the world, good news that cannot be silenced, good news that is proclaimed at the street corner as well as in places of worship. As George MacLeod of the Iona Community of Scotland so powerfully wrote:

*I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the corner of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek…at a kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where Christians should be and this is what Christians should be about.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Pentecost is about that kind of witness, a witness that reaches out to people where they are, rather than waiting for them to come inside. That can be unfamiliar ground sometimes; that witness can come in many shapes and sizes, in words and in actions, in bold shouts, in quiet whispers and in silent presence that is more powerful than any words. As one writer has said, “[T]he Holy Spirit is the imagination of God let loose in the world.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

We are to be instruments of God’s imagination to reach the world! That is what we are called to do by the Spirit of Pentecost.

That good work gives rise to the second question raised by Luke and spoken again by the crowd. After hearing Peter’s speech and being convicted by his words – “cut to the heart”, says the text – the people ask, “What should we do?” If we believe that the good news of Jesus is true, what should we do? Peter’s answer to the crowd is his answer to us: “Repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” And then he adds one significant note: “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.” No one is beyond the reach of God. No one is too hopeless, too sinful, too young, too old, too far away from God to be forgiven and saved. Pentecost is a welcoming call to all people to embrace the good news of Jesus, and it is a recurring call to those of us who have already been baptized to repent of our rotten ways and to embrace that Spirit which we have received from the hand of God – a Spirit that sustains us and empowers us to do what we cannot do alone.

Pentecost is about what God might do in us and through us – in our church, in our neighborhoods, in our nation, in our world, in our lives. It is not enough to hear the good news; we are called to respond and we are empowered to respond – to go out and live into the good news of Jesus, every day, because we do not go alone! God is with us! By the Spirit of Pentecost God is with us! Amen

1. Shirley Guthrie, Always Being Reformed, p.83 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. George MacLeod quoted in *Monday Morning*, January 9, 1995, pp.21-22 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John McIntyre quoted by J. Barrie Shepherd, *Whatever Happened to Delight?* Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006, p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)