

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 05/28/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Day of Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, May 28th

Acts 2:1-21

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Fanning the flames

On the Day of Pentecost, we mark the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and with it the birth of the church. The events of the first day of Pentecost have their roots set deep in history and demonstrate to us how God in His sovereignty uses all of history to accomplish His will. Such a broad perspective of salvation history helps us put today's challenges into their appropriate context. When the Holy Spirit came upon the first disciples on Pentecost, they overcame their fear and left the relative safety of the upper room to engage the world with the Gospel. As children of Pentecost, we are called to fan the flames in our time and place.

Acts 2:1-21 Commentary

Under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, Luke authored both the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. While separated in the canon, they can be considered as volume 1 and volume 2. Luke's Gospel covers a three-decade period of Jesus' life and Acts continues the story covering a three-decade period of the early church. The same Holy Spirit responsible for the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:35) is the same Holy Spirit that John the Baptist prophesied (3:16), the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus during His baptism (Luke 3:22), the same Holy Spirit that filled Jesus when He began His ministry (Luke 4:1) and is the same Holy Spirit that is poured out on the disciples at Pentecost marking the beginning of the new covenant age. Jesus alluded to the gift of the Holy Spirit: *And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24:49); *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now* (Acts 1:5); *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you* (Acts 1:8a).

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Pentecost (The Feast of Weeks) was one of the three major annual pilgrimage festivals in Jerusalem that Jewish men were expected to attend who lived within a twenty-mile radius. The disciples were staying together in Jerusalem (1:13) and this reference is to the whole 120 (1:15). The outward signs of the Spirit are likened (analogically) to wind and fire. These images are classic symbols associated with theophanies - a visible manifestation to humankind of God (Wind: 2 Samuel 22:16; Job 37:10; Ezekiel 13:13; Fire: Exodus 3:2; 19:18). The inward influence of the Holy Spirit produced outward signs in the ability to communicate in other languages.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

Jewish pilgrims from across the Diaspora would have been in attendance, perhaps staying in Jerusalem since Passover. A proselyte was a Gentile convert. Once filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples moved from the upper room and engaged the crowds (probably in the Temple Courts based on the numbers involved). Right from the start, Christians witnessed about Christ in public and did so to a worldwide audience, albeit primarily Jews and Jewish converts. The outward effects of the Spirit were clear - all the onlookers were amazed and perplexed. Such passion and extraordinary behavior appeared like drunkenness to some bystanders. Perhaps this is more to do with who God determines will accept the message. Those without "ears to hear" (Matthew 11:15) apparently just hear gibberish.

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

As Peter prepares to preach to the crowds, no doubt speaking the words given to Him through the Holy Spirit, he advises the onlookers that the disciples are not drunk since it is only nine o'clock in the morning. It was a regular practice with the Jews not to eat or drink anything until after the third hour of the day, especially on the Sabbath, and on all festival occasions. Sometimes this abstinence was maintained until noon. Rather than being filled with wine, Peter explains that what they are seeing is exactly what the prophet Joel foretold (Joel 2:28-32).

¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; ²⁰ the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. ²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The last days were inaugurated at Christ's first coming. At Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirits confirms we are in the last days. Most rabbis understood that the Spirit had ceased speaking through prophets with Malachi. Joel's prophecy of an outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh was understood as referring to a new messianic age. There were women in the group of 120 disciples in the upper room who also received the Holy Spirit and thus this further affirms Joel's prophecy.

Reflections

The first Christian Pentecost is a familiar story and the significance of this event relative to the birth of the Church is unmistakable. However, when we look at Pentecost in the broader context of the whole of salvation history, there is much more here than even the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There is another part of the miracle

of Pentecost besides speaking in tongues. Why were there Jews in Jerusalem from across all the known world listening to Peter's sermon that eventually return home and take the Gospel with them? How did this come to be?

One place to begin is back in Genesis. After the flood, Noah and his sons were given the command to be fruitful and multiply on the earth (Genesis 9:7). By Genesis 11 we read how all the people of the world had one language. As people migrated from the east, they came across a plain in the land of Shinar and built a city and a tower. In deciding to settle they acted contrary to God's command to fill the earth. They had no more use for God. They became independent and ambitious. They built the tower so high as to make a name for themselves - to elevate human accomplishment over God's glory. It was at this Tower of Babel that God confused the language. Never again would humans all speak the same language (Genesis 11:1-9). Pentecost is thus a type of reversal of the Tower of Babel but there is more to this story.

The land of Shinar appears again in the story of Daniel. It was the land of Shinar that Daniel and other elites of Israel would be taken to in what is known as the Babylonian exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. Shinar was in the land of the Babylonians. God used the Babylonians as His instrument to bring about His righteous judgment on Judah. Along with the earlier destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the subsequent displacement of the ten tribes by the Assyrians, Jewish communities would exist across the known world. This dispersal of Jews is known as the Diaspora. Centuries later, devout Jewish pilgrims from across the Diaspora would have aspired to travel to Jerusalem at least once in their lives for one of the major festivals. It is these divinely inspired events centuries earlier that resulted in many Diasporic Jews being in Jerusalem witnessing the first Pentecost.

There is still more to this story. After the Babylonians there would eventually come Alexander the Great and the Hellenization of this whole region. One consequence of this would be Jews from across the Diaspora would all understand Greek. Another consequence was the Jewish Scriptures would be translated from Hebrew into Greek (The Septuagint). Eventually the Romans would emerge as the dominant empire in this region and do two things the Romans were famous for: build roads and establish law and order. By the time of the first Christian Pentecost, not only did travel to Jerusalem by Diasporic Jews become easier, but it also meant the disciples after Pentecost could travel across the known world along such Roman roads to visit Jewish communities as a first port of call to spread the Gospel. The Roman roads also made it possible for evangelists like Paul to send his letters to strengthen and grow the churches he planted. Paul was also fully aware that his letters written in Greek would be understandable to all his audiences, despite the aftermath of the Tower of Babel.

When we see the things that God set in motion centuries earlier in order that the first Christian Pentecost could occur, it helps us to put the travails of the present into a proper perspective. God is still sovereign, and the Holy Spirit is still present in the world. Every believer at conversion experiences their own Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit is something that can renew us every day as we follow our chosen ministry. The flame that was lit on that first Pentecost is still burning today. Even though we may not be able to understand all the moving pieces, we can rest assured that God's will is being done in the world right now. As children of Pentecost, we are called to fan the flames in our time and place and continue the work of Christ.

Application

- How is your church living into the Pentecost movement?
- How does Pentecost translate into your daily living?
- Are you fanning the flames, ignoring the flames, or stifling the flames?