

Book of Acts: Declaring the Wonders of God

Acts 2:1-13

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The Greek word from which we get Pentecost, means 50th. The feast of Pentecost, known originally as the Feast of Weeks, was celebrated in Israel, 50 days after the waiving of the firstfruits, which was just after the Passover. There was Passover, then there was the feast of firstfruits. And Jesus, as risen, is called by Paul the firstfruits, the firstborn of the dead. Thus, our Lord's Passover suffering leads to the resurrection, the firstfruits. And, fifty days later, to the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. And in our text this morning from Acts chapter 2, we see that the Day of Pentecost had arrived, with the 120 or so disciples all together in one place. *We will make two points. The Spirit and the Nations. First, then, the Spirit.*

I. The Spirit

Now, before we get to the event itself. Let's pause, backup, and review. John the Baptist had promised, prophesied, saying: *I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* And not only this, he will administer the eschatological judgment, John continues: *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

Why, we might ask, did the final judgment, the eschatological fire, why did it not happen, as soon as Jesus was baptized? One could plausibly read John the Baptist's words and expect it to happen immediately. But we know what intervenes: the life and ministry of Jesus. He is baptized in the Spirit sent from heaven, receiving the Spirit in his human nature, filled, led, anointed with the Spirit, for his Messianic task of obedience, suffering, and death, for the sake of his people. He bears the fire of the judgment that he will administer-- for the sake of his elect. So, now, he who had received the Spirit, will now, exalted, from the Father, receive it in fulness. Having been baptized in the Spirit, and in the fire of Calvary's judgment, he now, pours out the Spirit and fire.

And all this is behind Jesus words to the apostles in the opening verses of this Book of Acts, reported by Luke: He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem,

but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me [and then what does Jesus say?] for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (and fire, we might add) not many days from now.” This is the day of the church’s being baptized by the baptized one.

And in v.2, Luke tells us of the startling phenomena. A sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind filled the whole house. This is an outward sign of the Spirit, the wind, or the breath of God. The same Spirit, which is like wind, also comes like fire in v.3. The likeness of wind and of fire together, are a Theophany – a God appearance. God comes down here in wind, as life-giving power; and fire, as blazing holiness and purity.

But notice, the tongues of fire, rested on each of them. For the church of Jesus Christ, the fire of judgment has been borne by the One who sends the fiery Spirit, and thus the Spirit resting, signifies, that for us... this is the Spirit, not of burning judgment, but of purification, transfiguration, and renewal.

As a result of this descent, in v.4 : they began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them. Tongues here means languages, as the context makes perfectly clear, this is not un-intelligible speech. This is the long promised end-time gift of the Spirit. Foretold by the prophets, as we will see, Lord willing, in Peter’s speech next week. That’s the Spirit.

II. The Nations

Our second point is the nations. Next, we learn something remarkable. Because this was one of the three feasts at which Jews were required to appear in Jerusalem, we are told that God-fearing Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven, were gathered there. The Jews had been scattered in the Assyrian invasion which destroyed the Northern Kingdom in the 8thc B.C. The remaining southern kingdom, then, in the 6th c B.C., was carried off into Babylon. Some of them returned from the Babylonian exile, but many did not. They were assimilated as citizens throughout the known world. And these Jews, who had not a prophet, or any revelation from God, for four hundred years, are here called devout men. They had remained faithful to YHWH in exile, in their far-flung corners of the world. The ends of the earth. For centuries. Some of those in Jerusalem were even converts to the faith. The judgments of God, his scattering of his people, were, in His tender mercies, a preliminary way of bringing the faith of Israel to the whole world.

So, this international multitude of Jews, is in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and they hear the ruckus, they come together, and they are confused. Why? The end of v. 6 tells us that everyone heard them speak in his own language. They hear Jews from Palestine speaking in all the languages of the Roman world. They know this can’t be normal. They say in v.7: Aren’t all these who speak Galileans? They

know that these were not Jews of the Diaspora, the scattering. They were local Jews, Israelites, Galileans (rough, uncultured, with their own distinct accent) to be more exact. Look at v.8: Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

Again, tongues (at least here) are real human languages. The disciples spoke, and the Jews from abroad heard their native tongues. This is not a miracle of hearing – it's a miracle of speech. That's why there is no gift of interpretation of tongues needed. The speech is intelligible in itself. That's the miracle.

Now it is tempting to skip, or skim quickly over vv.9-11, which contains a list of the ethnicities, the nations of origin if you will, of the devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem. But the presence of this list is a crucial piece of the story. The list moves roughly – roughly – from east to West. From the Caspian Sea westward. Verse 9: Parthians, Medes and Elamites – these are various people groups from roughly modern day Iran. Next are residents of Mesopotamia – roughly modern day Iraq. In these lands, as we said, Jews lived in exile for centuries.

Next, Judea is mentioned, probably meaning the full-extent of the land's boundaries under Solomon, (and thus probably including Syria). This would, obviously include local Jews still living in Israel. Then: Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia – all terms for what, in New Testament times, was called Asia minor, modern day Turkey. Phrygia and Pamphilia – more provinces of Asia Minor (covered N, S, E, W). Then south to North Africa: Egypt (thriving Jewish community in Alexandria) and Libya, then north and further west into Europe, visitors from Rome (tens of thousands of Jews) both Jews and convert (proselytes, so there are a few ethnic Gentiles present).

Finally, back eastward: Cretans (from the Mediterranean Island) and finally, Arabs (people from the Arabian Peninsula). What a remarkable list! It includes, to use the language of Genesis: descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth. Africans (e.g. Egypt, Libya), Semites (Middle East. e.g. Elamites) and Europeans (Rome). These are the nations that were previously described as “every nation under heaven.” Jews gathered as representative of the nations. They were not literally, of course, from every nation, but they were from virtually all the known parts of the Greco-Roman world. They represent the whole world. They are the whole world, theologically speaking.

The significance of this is two-fold. *First*, it tells us that Pentecost means the Spirit is going to be given to all nations. Pentecost means we now live in the age of the ascended Son's triumph, and this is the age of profuse outpouring of the Spirit, and thus the age of the ingathering of the nations. To the Jew first, gathered here, but also to the Greek. The gift of the Spirit is the gift of the ascended Christ reaping (beginning to reap) the harvest of the nations.

More precisely, then, this (list of nations) means that Pentecost is the undoing of Babel. The table of nations in Genesis 10, precedes the account of the judgment at the tower of Babel, which we saw in our OT lesson from Gen 11 this morning. And here we have our own “table of nations,” upon which the Spirit falls. At Babel, the nations acted in pride. Here the disciples waited in humility on the Lord’s promise. At Babel, they sought to ascend to heaven. At Pentecost, the Spirit came down as gift. At Babel, the nations were scattered, at Pentecost, the nations were gathered to Jerusalem. At Babel, divine judgment fell, confusing the languages of the earth. At Pentecost, through the gift of tongues, the earth’s language divisions are overcome.

Pentecost means God, through the Ascended Jesus, is undoing His scattering judgments, using them as a means of unifying the nations in the one new man, the new humanity of the church. Here, in the Spirit, a radical new unity in Christ is established which will transcend, not eliminate, but transcend and unify, all the racial, national and linguistic divisions of a divided humanity. This is the beginning of the descent of the cosmic temple, which will come down out of heaven from God, at the end of the age. And will transfigure the cosmos itself into a temple flooded with the glory of God. The gift of the Spirit IS the inauguration, the beginning, of that glory. For the gift of the Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity, is, let us never forget, the gift of God’s own life. Thus this gift makes the church into a temple, a dwelling place of the living God.

If we live in Pentecost time, and we do, then we must be a people of optimism and hope. We cannot allow our current struggles, or cultural situations, our social decay, our political travails, to be definitive. Our time is NOT defined decisively by any of these things. It is defined by the risen and ascended Christ, AND the gift of the Spirit. (These are to be the main facts on the landscape of your consciousness) So, let us be humble, sober, but cheerful warriors, for Christ has ascended, and poured out the Spirit. The heavenly temple is being built. (Descent begun)

So, all of these people hear the speech of the disciples in their own, native languages. And what are they talking about in these strange tongues? They are, we see in v.11, declaring the wonders (or the mighty works) of God. Almost certainly, this would center on the works of Christ, especially in his crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation. He is the consummation of all the mighty works of God. In v.12, they are amazed and perplexed, and they wonder about the significance of it all. In v. 13, some mock, saying “they have had too much wine.” They have indeed. The abundant new wine of the Spirit. That is the nations.

Now, I want to reiterate that Pentecost is unrepeatable (it is a unique, once for all event). It fulfills the prophecy of JTB. It empowers the apostles (apostles) to do their foundational task as witness bearers to the resurrection. It is, then, as unrepeatable as Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. To expect it to occur again, would be akin to expecting the ascension to occur again.

But that does not mean we do participate richly in its glory. The wind, the fire, the tongues are unique, but the power, the joy, the boldness, the life, the praise and worship, the witness, they are not. If you confess Jesus as Lord, you have partaken of the Spirit who came at Pentecost. We have all drunk of the one Spirit. And you are commanded in Ephesians 5, to continually seek to be filled with the same Spirit. And we must be filled with this spirit continually, but not for our own amusement. We are filled to speak, to bear prophetic witness, to declare the wonders, the mighty works, of God.

Notice: Spirit created worshippers first, and the worshippers, were then overheard by the nations. We must be worshippers – declarers of God’s wonders- who, as we wait for the great and glorious Day of the Lord, also declare the gospel, declared later in our chapter by the apostle Peter: Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. That is the message we bear to all peoples, and for that prophetic calling we have been given the Spirit.

Apart from this Spirit, this heavenly fire, this divine breath, Christianity is a powerless and drab affair. A long list of rules, a hive of activity, without any divine power or light. A desert without water. But the Spirit has come, and that means there is a new day, a new people, and the beginnings of a new world. It means that there is a river of life, into which we have been baptized, and to which, we must repair for renewal. It means that the scene in our text, ends with the glorious scene we heard read from Revelation 7: Where the fulness of redeemed Israel, and a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,

Are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” The Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, even American flesh. Join the catholic, the international, global throng in the overcoming of Babel – be then, a declarer of the wonders of God. Amen.

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