

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

What Does This Mean?

Acts 2:1-21

Sunday, May 19, 2024

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¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The

sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" Acts 2:12

No wonder some sneered and said, "These people are drunk!" This cacophony of languages all happens at the same time. Yet all these languages preach one message of God's powerful deeds. What does this mean? This Pentecost changes Pentecost forever.

Undoubtedly, the crowd in Jerusalem was well-versed in the meaning of Pentecost. Yet, when this particular Pentecost arrived, it was not like any of the previous celebrations they had experienced. The events that unfolded left them in a state of awe and wonder, prompting them to question, "what does this mean?"

Pentecost began in the days of Moses. There, in Deuteronomy 16, it is referred to as the Feast of Weeks. It occurs fifty days after the second day of Passover. You count seven weeks, seven sets of seven, add one day to it, and on that day, the Israelites were to hold a harvest festival, the Feast of Weeks. This is the time of year when the Spring wheat harvest begins in Israel, and this feast is a time of thanksgiving for the produce God provides. The Israelites were to offer up some of the initial harvest as a thanksgiving to God and a sign of trust that God would provide even more in the coming harvest. It is an act of thanks and faith at the same time. To live dependent on the rhythm of planting and harvesting and then give part of your initial harvest away is to put yourself at risk; what if the rest of the crop is destroyed by fire, storms, or invading armies? The offering for the feast of weeks is a sign of trusting God to care and provide even further harvest. So, they were to give a portion, a tenth as thanks and a sign of trust in God.

Over time, as Jews settled in other lands with different rhythms of planting and harvesting, this agricultural meaning did not always fit. In some parts of the world, this was not the time for harvesting but planting; in other places, it was a time to let the land lay fallow. So, the rabbis began to interpret the festival as a celebration for the giving of the Torah, the teaching of God to Moses at Mount Sinai, a lot of the material in our first five books of the Bible. Torah is seen as the first fruit of living in a right relationship with God, hearing God's teaching and committing to let these teachings guide our living. The primary way to celebrate this understanding of the Feast is to devote yourself to studying of the Torah for two days.

It was about this time that the meaning shifted from an agricultural harvest festival to a thanksgiving for God's teaching, that people began to refer to the festival as Pentecost. At the time, Greek was the most common language in the world. Pentecost is a Greek word. It literally means the fiftieth and refers to that week of weeks, seven weeks plus one day from the Passover.

All these meanings of the festival are what people gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost were prepared to celebrate. They would not have been surprised to see local farmers bringing some of their early harvests to offer to the priest. No one would have been shocked to see crowds of people from different parts of the earth gathered around various rabbis to study the Torah for a couple of days, or even some in their corners meditating on certain passages of the Scriptures.

The Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 is the Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus. Ten days before, Jesus ascended to heaven. For ten days, the disciples waited in Jerusalem, praying, expecting something to happen. They were waiting for one of Jesus' promises to be fulfilled, that the Holy Spirit would descend upon them. Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem until that happened. He did not tell them it would be on Pentecost. He just said wait until it does. So, there they are in Jerusalem, as Galileans bring gifts of harvest, Parthians and Medes gather around a rabbi to hear the Torah interpreted, and Elamites and Cappadocians meditate on the commandments.

Suddenly there comes the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Elamites and Parthians gather wondering if a

tornado is coming. Then what looks like flames of fire descend on the disciples. Cappadocians and Medes come running to see if a fire is breaking out in the city. They were amazed and confused. Then the disciples begin speaking, but they do not speak in their native language. Instead, the disciples, in a miraculous display, speak in different languages and Cretans, Arabs, Parthians, Medes, each hear the disciples speaking their own language. They know these disciples to be from Galilee and are amazed to hear them speaking in their own native tongues. Now they are even more amazed and perplexed, some even jest that the disciples have been drinking too much.

Every year when I hear this passage read, I pause to reflect, when is the last time the church, in its current state, did something so remarkable, so amazing and astounding, that the best explanation the world can come up with is, "These people must be drunk?"

That's what they say. They are filled with new wine. What does this mean?

Peter says, "They are not drunk, but this is the gift of the Spirit that was promised. It was promised to us by Jesus as he departed but before that it was promised by the prophets, that one day, God's Spirit would descend upon all; young, old, male, female, Parthians, Medes, Russians, Americans, Democrats, Republicans. This is what is happening."

This is what is so different about this Pentecost: The Spirit shows up in a new and powerful way. It is not that the Spirit comes into being at this point. The Spirit has been. The Spirit was there at Creation, brooding over the waters of chaos, breathing God's Creation into being. The Spirit would visit the prophets and judges of Israel, inspiring them to great words and acts in God's name. The Spirit was there equipping Christ for ministry at his baptism. What is different here is that previously the Spirit came to select individuals and often for a brief time to fulfill a specific mission. Now, the Spirit descends upon all the disciples gathered in Jesus' name and equips each one to engage in ministry. Each spoke of God's deeds of power as the Spirit gave them ability.

This is what is different, this is the unexpected and challenging of this Pentecost: that the Spirit of God is made available to each one to do totally unexpected, undreamed, unimagined things: your old will dream dreams and your young will see visions. This is not a passive gift, but a call to action, a challenge to step into the unknown and embrace the unexpected.

The disciples begin by sharing with people from other countries, speaking in the languages of those countries. Others ask what all this noise of the wind and several languages means, so Peter gives his first sermon on the death and resurrection of Jesus. By the end of the chapter, 3,000 new believers are added to the church. Pentecost becomes a new type of harvest celebration for the church. This is why we call this day the birthday of the church. It gave birth to the church's mission to bear witness to Jesus and convert onlookers to believers who become disciples.

As with the original understanding of Pentecost, this scene in Acts chapter 2 is just the first fruit, the initial harvest. The promise is not a fleeting visitation, but a continuous presence. The Spirit will continue to be with the church throughout time, enabling us to witness and share with others what Jesus means to us, inviting them to enter into a life of loving service to others. This is a promise that we can hold onto, a reassurance of the Spirit's ongoing support and guidance.

Maybe you didn't see it as the scripture was read, but the Spirit fell on you too. Maybe you didn't hear it like the sound of a rushing wind, but the Spirit empowers you too. Maybe you never thought or imagined you would be a witness to God's powerful deeds, but when the Spirit shows up, the old dream dreams, and the young see visions.

Thanks be to God.



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