

June 3, 2018

Gathered by God

Acts 2:1-4, 37-42

[A note to the reader: For our 2018 Summer Sermon Series, our messages will be preached without a manuscript. As our scripture lessons will be drawn from the book of the Acts of the Apostles (which contains something like 26 'sermons' on its own), there is no record of a 'text' that the various preachers used for their spoken messages. Thus, the 'manuscripts' that will be shared with you by mail and email will not be as complete as they usually are. Some more room for the Holy Spirit to enter will be allowed. Hopefully, you will also receive a measure of the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in your reading. Sincerely, Tom]

For hundreds of years until relatively recent times Pentecost was as much a celebration in the church as Christmas and Easter. Pentecost was the day that marked the arrival of God's Holy Spirit in an unmistakable way. Our scripture lesson today is the story of that wondrous and odd day. We visited this same passage a few weeks ago, on Youth Sunday, but it is well worth our while to hear again, as it is the opening story of our Sizzlin' Summer Sermon Series....

Listen, closely, for God's word today.

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

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

For clarity and simplicity today, I'll be using the ABC'S approach... (and yes, I've created this method just for today!) Here it goes...

A is for Amazed- what happened to those gathered at this particular Pentecost celebration hadn't occurred before-and hasn't taken place since!

B is for Befuddled- what everyone felt at hearing people gathered from all sorts of other lands speaking in a way that was understood by all (wouldn't you have been befuddled too?)

C- is for Compelled- what those present needed to do, not just to understand what all of this meant, but what they were then supposed to do about it.

S... is for Saved... (which I'll 'save' for the end.)

To begin...in an ABC News special some years back, "In the Name of God," Peter Jennings interviewed John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship (an independent evangelical group that was rapidly growing and generating a lot of attention). In the interview, Wimber spoke about the first time he attended church. He was already an adult. He listened attentively to the sermon and was fascinated by what he heard, so he went back. The same thing happened the next Sunday. He was enthralled.

Three Sundays in a row he returned to church, but by this time he was beginning to get frustrated, so following the service, he approached an official looking man and asked, "When do they do it?" "Do what?"

"The stuff," Wimber answered. "What stuff?" "The stuff in the Bible."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, multiplying loaves and fishes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That stuff."

"Oh," the man replied apologetically, "we don't do that. We believe in it and we pray about it and talk about it, but we don't do that." [end of story, for now]

What does it mean then, all this that we're amazed, befuddled and compelled about? Let's have a look at some of the details of the story for some answers.

The disciples had left the place of Jesus' ascension and were returning back to their own gathering space in Jerusalem.

All along the way they had run into crowds, larger than normal. This was unusual. People were coming to celebrate the Jewish festival day of Pentecost, or the Feast of the Weeks.

This festival was the Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest season. It was held seven weeks and a day after Passover ($49+1 = \text{"Pente/50"}$). The holiday not only celebrates the first fruits of the harvest, but also commemorates the Lord's giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Hebrew people.

Peter and the other disciples were gathered, including Matthias (the new replacement for Judas), apparently not knowing what to do next. Then something unexpected began to happen.

This was not a normal celebration. Though foreigners always came to Jerusalem for the celebration, it normally didn't happen like this. Both locals and travelers began to be astounded and amazed.

You can maybe begin to picture it in your minds' eye... maybe like an international soccer match at M&T Bank stadium or like a meeting at the U. N. ... how it was that an incredibly diverse group of people were gathered, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia and Phrygia and Pamphylia ... people of all sorts of languages . . . and then the most amazing thing happened. Though they *spoke* in their own native language, they began to hear the others in *their* own language, too. Parthians understood Medes, Medes understood Elamites, and scripture says, "all were perplexed, asking what does this mean?" This had never happened before! Was this the undoing of the curse of the Tower of Babel? Is this how life would be from now on?

Yet even in their disbelief and surprise, many of those present were befuddled, first by curiosity, then by skepticism. They must be drunk, a few decided. It wasn't just understanding each other's words, there was also a palpable sense of really understanding one another. Too much wine is the only thing that could explain this kind of openness to people of such varied lands and languages.

Peter, however, was quick to protest, "No, they're not drunk. Why, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Yes, it is an odd occurrence, but it is not as you suppose." And then Peter explains that it all happened as part of what the Old Testament prophet Joel had foretold. "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." (Joel 2:28) Peter then places the source of this occurrence squarely where it belongs; not on him but rather on the Holy Spirit.

Note carefully the odd sequence of the Pentecost events. For ordinarily, when a church gets fired up, we think of it, if we think of it at all, as happening when some fireball preacher under the power of the Holy Spirit is so charismatic and spirit-filled that he or she gets the congregation so excited that they do all sorts of amazing things; they start new mission projects, they launch a campaign to build a new sanctuary or new educational building, or go out on a new endowment program, or double the Sunday school. That's usually the way churches think — and if we can just get the right preacher- then the Holy Spirit of God will descend upon us, things will happen, the church will grow and God will be praised.

That's the way we usually think. The whole thing is based on the premise that if the right leader is found, miracles will happen.

Now don't get me wrong, leadership is important. But do not lose the meaning of Pentecost. Peter's sermon came *in response* to what was *already* happening in the congregation. Peter's sermon was an explanation of what had *already* taken place in the congregation.

On Pentecost, curiosity-seekers had come from all over because word had gotten out about what was going on there, and Peter's sermon was an explanation to those who were standing outside the church looking in, curious to know "*what does this mean?*" It was not the preacher who fired up the Pentecost crowd.

It was the Holy Spirit of God moving so powerfully through that little congregation of new believers that they attracted the attention of the whole town.

The curious came to see what it all meant and the preacher simply set out to explain it.

With it all, then, they were compelled to respond. And how did they do that? Well, over 3,000 were said to be baptized that day; that's a big head start! But that's not all that happened. It didn't end with baptism..., that was just the beginning, and this is where 'being saved' comes in.

For Romans and Greeks, 'salvation' generally meant a blessing, good fortune; a benefaction, either monetary or material (an award or public honor.)

For Jews, 'salvation' generally meant 'forgiveness', being made right with God once again: healing, restitution and atonement. For Jesus and some of the Pharisees, "salvation' also included a door to eternal life, the beginnings which are deeply rooted in life in the here and now, lived out on a daily basis.

This brings us all full circle to what the 'stuff' is that the church is called to do- (John Wimber's question). This clearly includes the ways we live out our salvation in our lives together: how we are saved from the worst in ourselves to be at our best for each other; called into living for Christ together, the same way the apostles did so long ago.

It is very clear from the apostles what the church begins with: four things to which they were first dedicated: "*teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" That's more than enough to get us started; it's the foundation on which the Spirit can use us to be the people of Christ here and now, bringing new life and new hope to a world that sorely needs it.

(We then celebrate the presence of the Spirit with us in 2 special ways—with the dedication of our new Stephen Ministry leadership Team: Shirley Reid, Mari Quint and Amy Carlson, and then we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together... a very good, Spirit-filled morning!)