

Two Questions
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures: Acts 2:1-24 (NRSV)

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:

¹⁷In 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.'

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" ³⁸Peter 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. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." ⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They

devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Sermon:

This Sunday is Pentecost. The word "Pentecost" is the Greek word for fifty and the title given to the Jewish Festival of Weeks or Shavuot. The Festival of Weeks was a series of weekly harvest festivals in thankful celebration to God for new grains, new wine, and new oil. Israelite religious lore also indicated that Moses received the Law fifty days after leaving Egypt and this event was also celebrated at Pentecost.

In the Christian tradition, the Pentecost fire and wind phenomenon, which is found only in the New Testament book of Acts, is understood as the event that inaugurated and empowered the post-Jesus Jerusalem community to proclaim him as the Messiah and launched its missionary efforts. However, the Jerusalem Jesus-community's evangelism did not initially go beyond the traditional boundaries of ancient Israel or what was known as the holy lands. It would be the Apostle Paul who would take the Gospel to those minority Israelite communities living among non-Israelite peoples and their nations; subsequently, over centuries giving rise to what is known as the Christian Church.

The story of this great wind of Pentecost has shaped the fate of nations. It has even turned human expectations of the divine upside down; it has elevated human character to its highest potential, and has been a force for hope, wholeness, and goodness in the darkest hours of human existence.

In his powerful Pentecostal proclamation, Peter, this lower-class, coarse Galilean fisherman, speaks boldly or confidently; or a better translation would be he speaks in a shamelessly offensive manner before those of higher social status. He and others proclaim that Jesus, whom the Jewish leadership had manipulated the Romans into crucifying, was in fact the messiah of Israelite prophecy and expectations. As proof of this, Jesus and all that he taught and did has been validated by God in his resurrection, and they, his disciples, are witnesses to his resurrection. Some gathered that day accused Peter and the others of having over celebrated with the new wine and were drunk, given that they were acting well beyond their social stations in such an ostentatious and disrespectful manner.

In Luke-Acts, we see two unique manifestations of the Holy Spirit. One is the anointing of Jesus at his baptism and the second is the anointing of the Apostles and the distinctive Jesus Community on the day of Pentecost. The author of Luke-Acts understood the anointing of the Apostles to be of the same nature and purposes as the anointing of Jesus. Those purposes were to commission and empower first Jesus and later the disciples to give witness to God's great loyalty to and care for God's people. God had come among God's people in Jesus of Nazareth, bringing a message of restoration in the kingdom's coming.

The Hebrew Scriptures are rife with people coming under the influences of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, in Acts we see a totally unique event. Previously, the spirit of prophecy had generally been limited to select groups or individuals, usually members of what we would call the elite - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, et al. However, the prophet Joel spoke of a time when there would be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in which divine revelation and proclamation would befall such people as Peter, both male and female, the old and the young, and even the servant classes.

In that time, all of God's people would experience the immediate and unmediated power and presence of God's anointing spirit. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, people would dream impossible dreams of God's power and presence in the land and be empowered to make it so. In

such a time, the Holy Spirit's outpouring would not discriminate among God's people. Now all those in God's spirit may envision a truly holy world - a time and a place of peace, justice, plenty, health, wholeness and be empowered to make it so.

Just days before the Pentecost event, Peter and the apostles had hidden in fear of the Jewish and Roman authorities. Now these men step up and step out without any regards for their social status or that of those in power, speaking with conviction and authority, proclaiming the Good News of God to their fellow Israelites gathered that day in Jerusalem.

These men of Judea could be understood as people whose lineage was either rooted in Judea and were living in other nations or people who had been born elsewhere and were now living in Jerusalem or Judea. It is interesting to note that where a person was from stereotypically determined who they were in the eyes of others. As we look at these various nations and the men from them we are left with the idea they are a mongrel bunch of insider Israelites but outsider Israelites.

However, these men are pious and devout men, who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebrations. They hear the Apostles, these crude Galileans, speaking to them in their own languages or native tongues. (This is called xenoglossia). The Apostles in our text do not speak in ecstatic tongues (glossolalia). In the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and in response to Peter's message of rebuke and warning, many of these devout men, may be out of a sense of collective complicity in Jesus death as Judeans, cry out, "Brothers, what must we do?"

Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus the Christ (in the authority of Jesus the Christ) so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That is, these men of Judea will come to know Jesus as the Christ, proclaim him so and be included in what is going on and escape the wrath of God for the crucifixion of an innocent man in their city.

Given that fire and water were understood to be two of the fundamental elements in which one could be immersed in or dipped in, we see a play on being dipped in purifying water and dipped in the purifying fire of baptism. Peter goes on to say, "...save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Peter declares that the sins that the people are to repent of, be forgiven for, or be saved from are the corrupt religious viewpoints and ways of the Judean Israelites of their generation who had crucified Jesus.

Let me stress that the sin or sins, missing the mark in an honorable relationship to God and others, were not acts of immorality as we modern Westerners normally associate with the term sin. The sins and corruptions Peter was addressing were the same things Jesus addressed - the abuses of an arrogant, exclusive, and highly stratified religion.

Please note that Peter is addressing a crowd of devout Israelite people - the text makes this point clear. These folks would have understood the moral and ethical requirements of God's law from their earliest memories and had in place a perfectly, good religious system with solutions for such behaviors. Peter now demands that these devout people move beyond their traditional religious perspectives and embrace the life and teachings of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises in the Anointed One. Jesus was and is the One, who would bring and teach the true ways of peace, justice, wholeness, and restoration to all of God's people and eventually even to those of the non-Israelite world. Jesus' way stood in contradistinction to the religious establishment's understandings of the coming kingdom, its values, and ways of life.

Peter demands that those inquiring minds in the crowd repent, that is change their religious life-stances and understandings. Men of Judea turn around, in heart and mind, but especially in your actions and go the way of the Christ because in him the kingdom has come near and will soon come in its fullness. Men of Judea repent and live in the new and dynamic power and presence of the Holy Spirit that is poured out on you regardless of who you are and where you come from.

Later in Acts, in the witness of Stephen, Phillip and Peter, we will see this acceptance of others put into action. These men of Judea now must be willing to accept and honor the Samaritans, the Hellenistic Israelites, so-called apostate Jews, as well as those less sophisticated people of the land because they are all truly brothers and sisters in God's family also.

These social-religious discriminations and exclusivities that have cut people off from the fullest participation in God's family were the sins of the crowd and the religious establishment of Jesus' day. These are the sins - offenses against others and God - that work against the cohesiveness and effectiveness of God's people and the coming of the kingdom. These are the offenses of dishonor that Jesus demanded the religious leaders repent of now echoed in Peter's message to the crowd. Moreover, I believe it has become the sin of much of Western, institutional Christianity, and many individual Christians today.

So much of Western or Occidental Christianity has become staid, self-confident, and arrogant in its institutional life, and I believe is suffering because of it. I fear that much of Western Christianity has relegated the Holy Spirit - God's power and presence among us - to little more than a foundational myth of the Church or some divine, imaginary playmate for the uninformed and unsophisticated.

Consequently, much of Western Christianity, particularly American Christianity, having outlived its original revivalist fervor on this continent, now looks to give itself purpose through various humanistic endeavors and upper-middle-class social issues under weak auspices of the Gospel. A Gospel interpreted by westerners for westerners. This comes at the expense of the Gospel's original purpose - calling people to actively live by the Good News of God in Christ in personal and collective acts of justice, healing, and wholeness in every aspect of one's life, while working for and looking forward to the kingdom of God coming on earth.

I believe mainstream Christianity in our nation is declining because the Church and its message in the main no longer tries to call people to participate in building the kingdom of God. It is all about belonging to a select group, personal piety, and morality as the means to salvation in death, played out in various religious and institutional enterprises.

True, people need to be confronted and called to embrace the Laws and ways of God and be saved from their lowest common denominators of unfettered sensualism, greed, indifference, and the quests for power over things and others. But, they also need to be saved from the illusions of cultural and religious exceptionalism; saved from the fragmentations of Christian denominationalism and so-called triumphalism.

The Wind and Fire of Pentecost can destroy or create. It can blow away the conceit, the arrogance, and the false security of so-called sophisticated, religious intellectualism, religious institutionalism, and un-reflected upon emotional, religious life-stances. It can draw people into a life-saving relationship with God and create a new and dynamic community of faith that can address the spiritual and moral needs of this generation and generations to come. It can empower people of faith to call others out of this morally, religiously, and politically corrupt and complacent generation and its idolatrous individualism.

The Wind and Fire of Pentecost can build a fire under us and in us, motivating us to speak boldly, to act boldly in the cause of Christ, whether rich or poor, old or young, male or female. That's the answer to the question, "What does this mean?"

The Wind and Fire of Pentecost comes blowing in like a tornado, looking to destroy our religious complacency and arrogance just as it did those devout men gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. It can create in us a new heart; give us a new mind, and a renewed focus for God's work in this world.

The answer to the men's second question: "Brother, what would you have us do?" Repent! Repent, turn around, go in the true way of the Christ, and be saved from the corruption of your

generation. Remember now, the corruption Peter speaks about is the corrupting mindset and ways of the elite Jerusalem religious establishment and the people of its ilk. The people who helped crucify Jesus with their self-satisfied religiosity and indifference to those of God not like themselves.

We each have experienced the Spirit's call, we have felt its claim on our lives, we live in the power of its assurances; therefore, I pray that God's spirit will cause us to continually ask those same questions posed by the crowd on Pentecost for our generation:

What does the Pentecost experience mean for us today?

And, God, what would you have us do?

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