

## *Discerning the Good Path Together*

Readings: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Selected Reading: Acts 2:1-21)

It has been a long journey for the disciples. What began as a hope filled journey followed by adoring crowds, has instead become a nightmare. Their leader had been crucified and, in an amazing turn of events, they now know has been raised from the dead. Beyond that he has appeared to them a number of times, confounding them and also filling them with joy.

In the first chapter of his second letter to Theophilis (which we know as the book of Acts) Luke tells the story of Jesus' last physical appearance. Jesus last words to those who were gathered was in the form of a promise, his disciples would receive a gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once they are empowered by the Spirit, Jesus claims that they would also be assigned a task: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

In today's reading, that promise is fulfilled as the Spirit descends upon the apostles who are gathered in prayer and the Spirit miraculously communicates God's Word to a radically diverse assemblage. Thousands are converted. The biggest confirmation class ever recorded!

It's a strange story. For starters, Luke's list of Pentecost observers gathered in Jerusalem is a strange assemblage: Elamites, Cretans, and Arabs who are comprised of people from Egypt, Libya, and Rome. This is some gathering of the nations.

And what are we to make of the inclusion of the long gone, mostly forgotten, Medes and Elamites? The Elamites were nearly wiped out by the Assyrians in 640 B.C.E. and were eventually absorbed into the Parthenian Empire. The Median Empire entered into a political alliance with Babylon and was later absorbed into the Empire of Cyrus II. The Medes had been extinct for over five-hundred years!

Some scholars note that the Parthenian, Medic, and Elamite regions housed descendants of the ten tribes of Israel as well as the two tribes who failed to return from exile. Recall the apostolic question we heard last week back in Acts 1:6, “Lord, is this when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” On that occasion the risen Christ told them that they couldn’t know the times and season but that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit and they would become witnesses. Get it? In this assemblage we are seeing the Spirit descending, as promised, descending on Jews from all over the world, even to the ends of the earth.

Peter’s sermon proclaims that God’s Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Surely the stress is upon all flesh, everybody, that is, all people. Israel is being reassembled but that assemblage goes beyond the bounds of what once was considered to be Israel.

We’ve got here a kind of preview of Peter’s vision in the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:9-23) in which Luke reiterates the universal, far-reaching scope of God’s salvation across all ethnic divides. Surprise, the “kingdom of Israel” now has boundaries considerably more expansive than the original scope. Look at all these “nations” who are now being included.

If Pentecost is the birthday of the church, it’s the birth of an organization that exists, not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of the world. Here’s a gathering that gets together in order to receive empowerment to scatter. This gift of the Holy Spirit is not for the first twelve who show up, but for all.

In Acts 2:16-21 Peter quotes the prophecy of Joel that speaks of all, everybody everywhere who “calls on the name of the Lord.” Peter claims that the prophecy was fulfilled. In Acts 2:39 Peter expands the promise saying that the promise of salvation is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom our God calls. Acts 3:25 reminds the church that in Abraham all the families of the earth are to be blessed. In Acts 13:46-47, when Paul is explaining his preaching, he

quotes not the Great Commission of Matthew 28 but Isaiah 49:6 where Israel is called to be a “light to the nations.” The universal scope of salvation is thus an important theme in Acts and it is a message that we would do well to remember.

Some interpreters connect Pentecost and the Tower of Babel story. At Babel, as a result of sin, tongues were scattered, and people could not understand each other. In Genesis, this story of confusion and separation laid the groundwork for world history. In Pentecost, by contrast, we have an event that lays the groundwork for a story of universality and unification. Maybe those who were separated by language, custom, and culture are now being brought together by the Holy Spirit.

Living Skies Regional Council is meeting this weekend in Prince Albert. They have also graciously been invited to participate in a Pow Wow which is also happening this weekend. There is hope that working together we can lower the barriers of language, custom and culture and be joined together by the Holy Spirit. The theme for the conference is Discerning a Good Path Together. It is an attempt to find unity as we work towards reconciliation with our First Nations sisters and brothers, to move beyond the pain and sorrow caused by residential schools and our treatment of First Nations peoples. Even though we thought our intentions were good, we found that the path we chose was not viewed by many as us being “light to the nations.” So as a church we stop for a moment, to listen to their voices, in the same way the disciples sought to listen to Jesus voice, in the hopes that joined together by the Spirit we may truly be witnesses to the nations. Witnesses who speak truth to love, and seek to live with the dignity and respect for one another, as the Spirit calls us to be and as the witnesses God created us to be.

The Holy Spirit puts constant pressure upon the church, causing the church never to be content in being the stable, select few of the spiritually elite but rather keeping the church in motion, always reaching out, always on the move with the good news for all.

Missionary par excellence Lesslie Newbigin says that, “God purposes the salvation of all. For this purpose [God] has chosen a people. Because that people have over and over again fallen into the sin of supposing that they have a claim upon God which others do not have, they have over and over again been punished and humiliated and have had to hear the word of God spoken to them from others.... Whenever the Church has imagined that it had a claim upon God which others did not have, it is already fallen away from grace. The church is servant and not master. It is appointed to a stewardship on behalf of all, not to a privilege from which others are excluded.”

When we read the Acts of the Apostles, we see that the secret of who God is and where the world is being guided has been entrusted to marginal communities scattered throughout Asia Minor—the narrative of Acts. Why has God chosen a particular community among all the peoples to bear the secret? Indeed, why has God chosen you or me? That is the open secret of God’s expansive intention to bless all the nations through the scandal of God’s elect. We are to be witnesses, with the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, to discern a “good path” in midst of the world’s pain, together with all of Creation, just as God intended, revealed through the Spirit. Let us walk the good path together. Thanks be to God. Amen.