

Amazed and Perplexed
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Acts 2:1-21

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.
¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.
²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

^{26c}“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

^{4b,c}“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to

you. ⁸And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

A word of preface to those of you sitting in the pews beyond the front pew: today’s sermon is not for you. I’m sorry to disappoint. You are welcome to listen in but what I have to say is not for you. So now that we have that out of the way, you, the confirmands, didn’t know it but *this* is the last lesson of your confirmation classes. No need to take notes this time and no written homework due next week. Let’s begin, shall we?

What is Pentecost? Literally, the Greek word means fiftieth day. To the Jews in the time of Jesus, Pentecost was known as the Festival of Weeks. It very intentionally followed Passover by fifty days. If you remember, what we consider the Last Supper was, for Jesus and his friends, part of the Jewish Passover feast, when faithful Jews gathered together to remember how their ancestors were freed from slavery in Egypt. Pretty significant when you think about the fact that the events after the Last Supper ushered in our freedom from slavery to sin and death. That parallel is not a coincidence.

When the time came for festivals, Jews from all over came to worship at the temple and the Festival of Weeks was no different. The Festival of Weeks celebrated the harvest so the Jews were coming to offer sacrifices of thanks for their bounties. So, the fiftieth day as the Greeks would have called it was yet another Jewish holiday which took on new significance for the followers of Christ when the Holy Spirit arrived.

We read that people were amazed and perplexed when the disciples began speaking in many languages but why was that the case? As I said, Jews came from all over to make their sacrifices, which meant coming from many lands, or nations, which meant speaking many different languages. Galilee was what we might call a town out in the sticks - it wasn’t very big and nobody really traveled into or out of Galilee. It wasn’t a center of higher learning like Rome or even Jerusalem. The people there couldn’t have been exposed to more than two languages. And yet, the disciples of Jesus, who you might recall he recruited from Galilee, were all suddenly speaking fluently in languages from all over. All the visitors coming to the temple understood them, from even the remotest of Jewish settlements.

In our world, we are privileged that our language is a common denominator for many so imagine, if you will, that you’ve arrived in, say, Sri Lanka and you overhear someone talking about your best

friend. Would you not be amazed and perplexed? You, too, might ask, “What does this mean?” And, as for those who sneered and said the Galileans were filled with new wine, well they didn’t understand the other languages any more than a Galilean should so what they heard was gibberish, meaningless chatter.

In defending the disciples, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Peter quotes Joel, a prophet from the Hebrew Bible, whose writings we can find between Hosea and Amos, in the section of the Old Testament that chronicles the words of the prophets. Peter tells them, and us, that he is quoting Joel so we don’t have to figure it out. But, whenever you are reading your Bible and you see a verse or a few verses that are indented or formatted differently, that’s your hint that another part of the Bible is being quoted or paraphrased mostly from the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. In the case of our reading in Acts, verses 17 - 21 all come from the second chapter of Joel.

There’s a lot there to interpret so I’ll give you a highlight. What does it mean that “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams?” Well, first, what’s the difference between prophesy and prophecy? If you see the letter “c” in the word, then the word is pronounced “prah-fih-see,” like the letter “c.” And if it has the “s,” the word is pronounced “prah-fih-sigh.” Confused yet? “Prophecy” is the noun, the thing. “Prophesy” is the verb that produces the noun. I promise there won’t be a quiz; it’s just a good thing to know.

So, back to the prophecy of Joel about all these different kinds of people. What comes before that line is this: “God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” The list of all different people which follows is there to emphasize that the Spirit will be poured out on *all* flesh, everyone. Everyone can receive the Spirit of God. Peter is telling the gathered crowd who are hearing the disciples in their own languages or who they are perceiving to be speaking gibberish aren’t the only ones who can receive the Holy Spirit. Even they who are overhearing, they who did not themselves witness Christ when he lived, can still receive the Holy Spirit and can claim the promises of Christ. Although this was spoken to the very specific people gathered there on that fiftieth day, the good news is not only for that time but for all times, and all peoples, since then and yet to come. The good news and the gift of the Holy Spirit is for us, too.

Why does it matter that the Holy Spirit came and what does it mean that the Holy Spirit is known as the Advocate? Well, I don’t need to answer this one for you; you already have in your statements of faith. You’ve written that “The Holy Spirit is active. It gives us life. It teaches us that change is good. The Holy Spirit will be with us no matter what.” “The Holy Spirit is a friend who helps you. You can feel it when you read the Bible and some of the scriptures stick in your head. The Holy Spirit is in us, just like Jesus and God.” You’ve said that, “The Holy Spirit acts as a guide, or a force nudging me to

make good decisions.” “The Holy Spirit is healing, and stands by your side no matter what.” “The Holy Spirit is a guide. It will help us through life and call us to ministry. Yes, everyone is called to ministry in their own ways. Not all of us have to be ministers to fulfill our callings.” I couldn’t have said it better myself.

So why are you being confirmed on Pentecost? We say that Pentecost is the day the church was born and what we mean is that it is the first time people claimed the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of sharing the good news, each in their very own way, using their very own unique combination of gifts. Through your statements of faith, and your going before the Session with your statements, and soon, through your profession of faith here, you claim, for the first time on your own, the unique blend of gifts that the Holy Spirit has given each of you. You are vowing to carry out the promises of baptism that others made on your behalf; they, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promised to guide and nurture you by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging you to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church. Today, you join the disciples in committing to continue to get to know and follow Christ more and more throughout your lives and to be faithful members of his church.

Although we cannot see the Holy Spirit present here today, just as at your baptisms, we trust that the Holy Spirit will be upon you and in you as your promises are confirmed and we pray that you will continue to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit for all of your days. We are grateful that you are making this commitment and we welcome you into the life and work of the church of Jesus Christ as full members. For this, let us give thanks in prayer.

Let us pray: God, we thank you for your Son, and for the Holy Spirit who has moved in each of us. Today, we thank you especially for the ways in which your Spirit has moved among these young women and for the wonderful gifts they have been given, those we can already see as well as those to be discovered over time. We ask that you bless their days and bless us as we together live and serve in your name. Amen.