

DAY OF PENTECOST June 9, 2019 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are told in this passage that “devout *Judeans or Jews* from every nation under heaven were then living in Jerusalem.” Repeated conquests by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires had forced many of *them* to flee Palestine. These exiles retained many of their ethnic and religious characteristics, even while adapting to the cultures of their new residences. They made homes for themselves and many chose to remain in the lands where they had moved. Those described here were likely descendants of several generations of Jews who had lived outside of Palestine. They were in a real sense residents of varied nations; however, they also remained devout *Jews*—both ethnically and religiously. These Jews from “every nation under heaven” were considered part of the “*diaspora*” – those Jews who for one reason or another found themselves dispersed away from their ethnic homeland to various countries and regions in the known world. They were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, a festival celebrated on the 50th day after Passover.

It was a feast day when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop to offer to God. It was partly a sign of gratitude and partly a prayer that all the rest of the crop would be abundant and safely gathered in. But neither Passover nor Pentecost was simply an agricultural celebration. These events awakened echoes of the great stories which dominated the long memories of the Jewish people: the promise God made to Abraham, the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the sacrifice of the lambs whose blood marked the homes of the Jews in Egypt so that their first sons were saved from slaughter, the passage through the Red Sea and the pilgrimage into the Sinai desert and ultimately to Mt. Sinai itself. In other words, the story about God giving his redeemed people the way of life by which they were to carry out his purposes. The resurrection of Jesus was seen as resembling the first sheaf offered to God as a sign of the great harvest to come. Since Moses *went up* on the mountain to receive the law and bring it to his people, Jesus had *gone up* to heaven in the Ascension.

Thus, Luke wants us to see Jesus *returning* through the Holy Spirit, *not with tablets of stone*, but with the *dynamic energy* required of the followers of Jesus in the aftermath of his execution and later departure.

The Acts of the Apostles is perhaps the most neglected New Testament book in the lectionary cycle. All of the material here is part of the second volume of a two-volume work known

conveniently as Luke-Acts, all of it authored by a single writer. The whole narrative here (from the beginning of the gospel through the book of Acts) begins with the parents of John the Baptist in Jerusalem and ends with Paul in Rome. Luke set out to write a history --- but not what we would recognize as history by modern standards. In reality, his work is a pastoral exercise rather than an evangelical one; it intends to upbuild and enlighten rather than to convert. Theophilus, for whom he writes is probably already a Christian. The life of faith to which Jesus calls his followers in St. John's gospel, for example, has little content beyond the command to love one another. That is about all that was open to them. John wrote to a community of believers for whom that was a precious word. They had no prospects.

In such cases, the gospel is a reminder that God offers hope beyond hope. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. In a similar way, Luke wrote so that Theo could "know how well-founded are the things you have been taught"

He also wrote for people who had suffered the shock of the Temple's destruction—the loss of the symbol of God's presence among his people. They had suffered from the general disillusionment in the Roman Empire as the promise of the great peace under Augustus dissolved into dynastic wars in Rome and corruption and mismanagement in the provinces. They had suffered the breakup of families over the issue of Jesus' Messiahship. Some were certainly tempted to abandon the world of history and to cultivate their private piety—if not to abandon the whole religious enterprise altogether in the belief that God had abandoned the world. Luke set out to speak a pastoral word to such people—not just to offer a sense of comfort, but to suggest that history is still the arena in which God's will is worked out and not simply the domain of the devil.

The outpouring of the Spirit, which is described in our passage for the day in such a memorable way, is the fulfillment of John the Baptist's and Jesus' predictions. Here it results in the ability to speak in foreign tongues. Those who are able to hear the testimony to the "mighty works of God" are Jews from every nation. The story tells of the gathering of the Diaspora and the restoration of a faithful remnant in Israel. Gentiles would be of interest only later. The point here is that with the outpouring of the Spirit and the offer of salvation in Jesus' name, God was keeping his word to his people, Israel.

When we try to account for the rapid growth of Christianity in the first three centuries of the Common Era, this is a good place to start. N.T. Wright says that Luke clearly intended to "describe *something new*, something powerful enough to *launch(ed)* a great movement." Indeed, if we look at the disciples before Pentecost and after, we can see this clearly.

A “small group of frightened, puzzled, and largely uneducated” men and women became a “force to be reckoned with,” and did so in a kind of instantaneous about-face. Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest so well known for her brilliant preaching, notes that “we can see that Jesus was the Messiah when we think about his followers in a kind of before-and-after set of pictures.” Before Pentecost, they didn’t fully know who Jesus was despite having been his faithful disciples and having been privy not only to his public preaching but also to his private moments of reflection. They didn’t stick with him when he got into deep trouble with the authorities. They abandoned him, and then when he rose from the grave, they didn’t believe it.

But on Pentecost “those very same slow, timid, bumbling disciples become utterly fearless leaders...(they) proclaim the gospel in front of both large crowds and menacing authorities...(they) heal sick people and exorcise demons...(they) even go to jail gladly where they sing hymns that shake their prison’s foundation.” How else to explain this than by the power of the Holy Spirit which descended upon them on that 50th day after Passover in an unforgettable scene in Luke’s *Book of Acts*?

Thanks be to God.

(Sources: N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox, London, 2008; Scott Hoezee and Doug Bratt, “Pentecost C (2016) and Pentecost B (2018)” Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Seminary; Alastair Roberts, “The Politics of Pentecost,” Political Theology Network, 2014; The Editors, “The Politics of Acts 2: 1-21,” Political Theology Network, 2012.)