

Message for the Day of Pentecost, Year A (5/31/2020)  
Acts 2:1-21

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed [the crowd].”

Peter is an unlikely candidate to deliver a sermon at Pentecost. Despite the accolades the church has heaped upon him in retrospect, at this point in the story he’s done little to win our confidence. The same can be said of all the apostles.

Peter has spoken up once already in Acts to insist upon a replacement for Judas among the remaining eleven. “[Judas] became a guide for those who arrested Jesus,”<sup>1</sup> Peter reminds his fellow disciples, yet his indictment sounds hollow. Is not this the same Peter who denied Jesus at the decisive moment? “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” he had avowed prior to Jesus’ arrest, but that very night his courage dissolved. “Woman, I do not know him,” he lied to the servant-girl, the first of his three betrayals in the courtyard outside the high priest’s house. Fleeing the firelight in sorrow and disgrace, “he went out and wept bitterly.”<sup>2</sup>

As much as anything else, Peter’s call to replace the traitor Judas sounds like a deflection from his own disloyalty. Judas is the fall guy, but the disciples all stood at a distance from Jesus’ hasty trial and execution. Where were they when he needed them the most?

Jesus’ resurrection gives his followers a thrill of hope, yet even after his ascension they remain huddled in the upper room, day by day devoting

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:16.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:31-34, 54-62.

themselves to prayer. Jewish pilgrims begin to congregate in Jerusalem from all over the world, preparing for Shavuot, or Pentecost, the harvest festival and commemoration of God's gift of the Torah. Amid all the activity, no one notices the quiet band of disciples sequestered in the guest room upstairs.

Enter the Holy Spirit, rushing in like the wind and alighting like a tongue of fire on each follower of Jesus. It's unmistakable, like a burning bush, like a blaze atop Mount Sinai, like a pillar of flame in the wilderness. And, as throughout the sacred story, the Spirit's arrival signifies the advent of something new. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak...." And, when the Spirit provides the words, the crowd listens. "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language... [these Galileans] speaking about God's deeds of power?" Some are compelled, others are not, ridiculing the disciples for their purported drunkenness. "But Peter, standing with the eleven, [raises] his voice and [addresses] them."

This is another decisive moment, a second chance for Peter to speak up for Jesus. William Willimon gives credit where it's due: "In Genesis 2:7 the Spirit of God breathed life into dust and created a human being. In Acts 2:1-4 the Spirit has breathed life into a once cowardly disciple and created a new man who now has the gift of bold speech." And, this gift is bestowed not only on Peter, but on all the disciples assembled with the crowd in Jerusalem. "The miracle here is one of

proclamation,” Willimon summarizes the Pentecost account. “Those who [previously] had no ‘tongue’ to speak of the ‘mighty works of God’ now preach.”<sup>3</sup>

We owe the Spirit our gratitude for a multitude of gifts, to include her quiet influence on the heart, her help in our weakness, her intercession “with sighs too deep for words.”<sup>4</sup> But, the Spirit’s gift at Pentecost is the nerve to stand up and say the words she’s given us to say. **The Spirit’s gift at Pentecost is a tongue to speak the truth.**

But, what truth? What are these “deeds of power” that become plain to the people through the disciples’ proclamation? By the power of the Spirit, God breathed life into all creatures. By the power of the Spirit, God delivered God’s beloved people from slavery and led them to a land of freedom. By the power of the Spirit, God appointed Mary to bear the Son of the Most High and to name him Jesus, the one who would bring down tyrants and lift up the lowly. By the power of the Spirit, God anointed him to bring good news to the poor, to liberate captives, to free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. By the power of the Spirit, God raised up witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, his release from the grip of death, as a sign that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

**This is the “honest to God” truth, that by the power of the Spirit, God has always acted for the sake of more abundant life, especially on behalf of**

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<sup>3</sup> *Interpretation: Acts*, 31-2.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:26.

**those who are deprived of it.** And, that's the word the Spirit instills in her spokespersons throughout the ages. "In the last days," Peter quotes the prophet Joel, "it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your [children] shall prophesy...." Pentecost happens wherever the Spirit of God rouses prophets, those in every generation with a tongue to speak the truth, even in the face of ridicule – the women who demanded equal access to the democratic process; the crowds that marched and sang for Civil Rights; the children who cry out in defense of the Earth, their inheritance; all those who refuse to accept racialized abuses of power. "God of blazing, God of burning," Herman Stuempfle Jr. pens in the second verse of his Pentecost hymn, "all that blocks your purpose purge! Through your church, Christ's living Body, let your flaming Spirit surge! Where deceit conceals injustice, kindle us to speak your truth, kindle us to speak your truth!"<sup>5</sup>

If you've struggled to find your voice, friends, let Pentecost be your inspiration. And if the Spirit has her way, you won't keep quiet any longer. You'll stand with others and raise your voice to the crowd. Some will be compelled, others will resist. But, that won't change the truth of your claim. God has made known to you the way of life<sup>6</sup>; now is the time to join together to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #400.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:28.

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew Edition, 231.