

## How to Experience a Renewal of Faith

Acts 2:1-21

This past Tuesday when we were in the morning Bible study I spoke with the folks there about the passage we read for today, and I asked about some of our traditions surrounding this very special day. I asked, “Why are we going to plant some plants today?”

They said, “It’s to symbolize the birth of the church on Pentecost. God planted the first church on Pentecost day.” Good, I said, and why are we all going to be wearing red on Sunday? I was met with puzzled looks.

Someone mentioned that it might symbolize the blood of Jesus. Others couldn’t seem to recall why it was that we dress up in red today. Someone finally pointed out that the red symbolizes the tongues of fire that appeared on the heads of the disciples as God’s Spirit came upon them.

What I hope to show you is that Pentecost is a very important day for us in the church. Some call it the birthday of the church, at least according to Acts. I think the church was born on Easter day, but that’s another discussion.

Pentecost was the day when God made it clear to the world that a new day in history had dawned, one in which God reached out to the entire world in a direct manner. In the past, according to the Bible, God had tried to reach the world through the people of Israel.

But Acts tells us that God had taken a new approach, with Jesus getting everything ready by preaching and teaching and healing, and dying for the sin of the world.

Pentecost is the time when God, through the church, tried to reconcile the world to God’s self, tried to patch things up, made a new and history changing gesture to let everyone know that God loves all of us, regardless of who we are, and that God’s kingdom is available to everyone who seeks it.

What I want to do today is explain what happened that day, give you some background, and then talk about what changed for those disciples, and how we can have the kind of renewal they had as a church.

Let me start by trying to set the scene. In Judaism at that time, there were a few major religious festivals that all devout Jews were supposed to observe. Two of them are in the spring/early summer.

The first is Passover, a celebration of the way in which God enabled the Israelites to leave a life of slavery in Egypt on their way to the Promised land, which we now know as Israel. During Jesus' time there were Jewish people living in most parts of the Roman Empire, from Egypt to Lybia to Italy to Turkey.

Every spring people would come to Jerusalem from all of these different places and celebrate Passover. Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples on the day before he was arrested and executed. He turns that Passover meal into a meal to commemorate his impending death.

As you know, he dies on Friday in Luke, then is resurrected on Sunday. But the other major Jewish holiday during this time of the year is related to Passover. This holiday is called Shavuot, or the feast of weeks.

In the law of Moses the Israelites are commanded by God to count seven weeks from the Sunday after Passover. At the end of those seven weeks (which is why it's called the feast of weeks) Jews would again come from all different parts of the Roman Empire to Jerusalem to observe this feast.

Now if you count seven weeks, which is forty nine days, plus the Saturday after Passover, you get fifty days between Passover and the feast of weeks. The word in Greek for the number fifty is Pentecost, which is why we use that word.

So Pentecost is actually another name for the Jewish feast of weeks or Shavuot. It was not originally a Christian holy day. It was actually a spring harvest celebration where farmers came to the temple to offer God a portion of some of the livestock and the crops that had grown in heir fields.

But in the meantime, beginning probably a couple hundred years before Jesus, some of the religious leaders wanted to change the focus of Shavuot. Instead of being a harvest festival, they wanted to make it a remembrance of the fact that God gave Israel's laws to Moses.

The story began to spread that it took seven weeks for the enslaved Israelites to travel from Egypt to this mountain, called Mt. Sinai, where Moses encountered God and received the laws.

There was a sense in the minds of these leaders that many Jews had stopped following those laws. They associated Israel's troubles with the fact that people weren't so

concerned with following those laws. So they associated Shavuot with God giving the law to Moses.

So what does this have to do with the birth of the church? Well, seven weeks after Jesus' death in resurrection his disciples were in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot. They were there in town with every other devout Jew that weekend.

On the day of Shavuot or Pentecost, they were in prayer. Now they had been told to stay in Jerusalem until God had given them the power to carry out their mission. That power was about to change their lives.

As they prayed, Acts say that there was a loud sound of wind rushing in the room. It also says that tongues like fire came down onto the head of everyone there. And if that weren't crazy enough, they all started speaking in foreign languages that they didn't know.

As you might imagine, this caused quite a stir. Remember that there are people from all over the place in town that day. But the odd thing was that those people from those other places heard the apostles talking not in Aramaic, which is what they spoke in Jerusalem, but in the language of the places where the visitors came from.

Acts lists fifteen different languages that were being spoken by the apostles. There are a couple of things that I want you to keep in mind as you think about this image of people speaking in the language of all the Jews from all these places.

First the image of people speaking all these languages reminds you of the story in Genesis where the people of the world try to build a tower high enough to reach God. But God doesn't want them to be so pretentious.

So God causes them all to start speaking different languages. When that happened, they couldn't understand each other and they couldn't cooperate in building the tower anymore. That story is really a theological way of explaining why there are so many languages spoke in the world.

The story of the apostles in Pentecost is kind of a reversal of that tower of Babel story. Instead of causing people to speak other languages in order to cause confusion, God causes people to speak other languages in order to bring clarity to God's message.

And that brings me to the other thing I want you to remember here. We tend to interpret this passage as God's way of getting the message out to people of all places and all languages. But that honestly isn't the author's point here.

These Spirit filled apostles were not speaking to people of all different races. They were speaking exclusively to Jewish people. And the idea is that these Jewish people who were in town for Pentecost would go back to all the places where Jews live and give them the message being spoken by the apostles.

That message was pretty clear: God is moving in a different direction. God is not working in the world exclusively through the Jewish people anymore. God is just as interested in everyone else. In other words, God has just gone global. And at Pentecost, God put the Jewish people on notice.

As you might expect, people reacted in a variety of ways to this event. Some were astounded. Some thought, “Wow, how could we have missed this happening right under our noses?” Others made fun of the apostles. They thought the apostles had done a little too much partying.

Peter steps forward and begins to explain to the people what’s happening here. He compares this event to an oracle by an Old Testament prophet named Joel who also spoke about God’s spirit coming upon people.

Peter re-interprets that oracle as speaking about the coming end of the world. It talks about God’s spirit being poured out not only on the most devout or the most religious or the most important people of society, but on everyone.

It talks about God’s spirit enabling boys and girls to speak prophecy. It talks about seniors having dreams enabled by the Spirit. It talks about young men seeing visions. It mentions slaves, both men and women, speaking prophecy on God’s behalf.

Peter says, “That’s what’s happening now. The train’s leaving the station. Hop on now if you want to be a part.” Acts 2 says that about 3000 people hopped on the proverbial train at that point and joined the apostles in founding the church.

The rest of the book of Acts tells of how that small group of apostles began to turn their world around and take the message of God’s kingdom all over their part of the world.

To be able to do that, they needed to be empowered by God. They needed to have an infusion of God’s Spirit. And they had go from being a timid little group who quietly remembered Jesus to being a powerful witness for God in their community.

The question I want to deal with today is how we can have that kind of renewal in our own church. How can we have a Pentecost type of experience? We're probably not going to ever have a mighty wind blow through here – at least I hope not. And we're probably never going to have tongues of fire on our heads (I can just imagine trying to explain that to the fire department when they arrive).

But this passage tells us something about being renewed by God's Spirit. First of all, I think we need to sidestep a lot of controversy and admit that we honestly don't know how and when God's Spirit works, or what it does.

Church history is full of people who tried to measure and quantify when and how the Spirit operates, and how it comes to us from God. And most of those explanations fail because, honestly the Bible itself describes the Spirit of God in so many different ways.

Sometimes it empowers people to speak foreign languages. Sometimes it empowers people to speak an unintelligible language. Sometimes it empowers people to heal or prophesy. Sometimes the Spirit even helps people show hospitality.

It's nearly impossible to say "Here's how it works." Jesus himself said that the Spirit blows where it wants. It's mysterious, and we ought to just let it be mysterious. We shouldn't worry that we don't have it. We shouldn't try to figure out what we need to do in order to get it.

Let God worry about those things. It isn't our business. Jesus told his followers to just wait and be faithful and God would send the Spirit at the right time. Sometimes we're aware of it, and other times we're not. Just keep trying to do what's right and God will send God's Spirit when God decides.

The other thing I want to point out here is that the emphasis is on the way that the Spirit enables the church to break through boundaries that had traditionally defined what God would and wouldn't do.

In the time before Pentecost God had spoken to and empowered people almost exclusively from certain walks of life. God's spirit usually rested upon men, often men who were from a priestly background, men who were not slaves, and almost always men who were Israelites.

Acts shows us that those restrictions no longer apply in the church. The church was made up of people from many different walks of life. In the church the Spirit was just

as like to empower a woman as a man, a free person as a slave, and later on they find that the Spirit is just as likely to be given to a non-Jew as to a Jew.

Barriers such as race and class and gender are not barriers for the Spirit. For you and me that means we cannot say something like, “Well, God’s not going to work through that person because she’s a woman” or “God certainly isn’t going to be active in people of that race – you know how they are” or “God could never be active among those folks who live in the housing project. Their lives are just too screwed up.”

That’s one of the shocking things about this story. In that time a person was almost completely defined by things like gender and race and geographic location and social class. Acts says, “Not in the church. Those categories hold no currency here.”

We don’t know what the Spirit is doing in our Hispanic congregation. But every week I expect the Spirit will do something. We don’t know how the Spirit will move our Burmese brothers and sisters. But we go forward in the faith that the Spirit will empower them to do whatever it is that they are called to do.