

“The Story Continues”

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

During the past few years, Susan and I have been watching a lot of television programs on various streaming services, including Netflix. These series have ranged from comedies to dramas to thrillers that have left us on the edge of our seats. We have also discovered that there are two different kinds of series on these streaming services: limited series, which have a specific number of episodes and come to a final conclusion, and ongoing series that may continue into subsequent seasons. We enjoyed such limited series as “Inventing Anna” and “Midnight Mass,” and we recently finished the final season of “Ozark” and are beginning to watch the fourth season of “Stranger Things.” While these limited series have been very interesting and enthralling, an ongoing series offers the promise that the story into which we have entered is not yet finished – the story continues.

The books of the Bible offer similar diversity; any of them are of a limited nature, while others offer the promise of a story that will continue. Old Testament books such as Job and Esther tell stories that have a definite ending, while the books of the Torah and prophets look toward the future of God’s people, a story that will extend beyond the present generations to which these books were addressed. Many of the letters of the New Testament are addressed to specific audiences and circumstances, reaching a firm conclusion; Paul’s letter to Philemon and the Pastoral Epistles (First and Second Timothy and Titus) are examples of such writings. Other Pauline letters, while addressed to specific communities of faith, look beyond the time and place of their writing to the future of God’s people; Romans and both letters to the Corinthians present stories that continue after their time and place. Perhaps the best example of a story that continues on after its original setting are the writings of Luke, both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. At first, it appears that the author is addressing a specific person in a specific time and place; Luke begins his Gospel with a purpose statement in which he addresses the person to whom the book is originally addressed:

- “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who

from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account to you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” – Luke 1:1-4.

The identity of “Theophilus” is somewhat mysterious; the name means “lover of God,” and Luke might be addressing either an individual or any person who loves God. Luke identifies previous authors who have set down portions of the Gospel story, the *kerygma* (proclamation) of the good news of Jesus Christ and announces the purpose of his “orderly account” so that all who read these words may know the “truth” of what has been taught in the early church.

- “Because God’s promises to Israel have been fulfilled through the life and teachings of Jesus, we can know the assurance that is grounded in God’s redemptive love, praise God with unbounded joy, fervently follow Jesus’ example and teachings, open our lives to the leading of God’s Spirit, and respond to the call to join the company of witnesses spreading to the ends of the earth the good news of Jesus’ coming.” – Alan Culpepper.

Luke is similar to the other Gospels in his account of the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as our Risen Lord’s appearance to his disciples. But unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, Luke ends his Gospel with a clear indication that the story will continue after this book has ended. This open-ended conclusion comes when our Risen Lord instructs his disciples that “*you are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*” (24:48-49). After these final words, Jesus “*withdrew and was carried up into heaven*” (24:51). Following the Ascension of Our Lord, the disciples “*worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*” (24:52-53). It is clear that the story that Luke has been telling has not reached its conclusion – the story must continue.

This story continues with the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of Luke’s writings. Luke is unique among the Gospel Evangelists in presenting a comprehensive story of the history and mission of the early church as the apostles (those who were “sent out” by Jesus) fulfill his commission to be “witnesses” (*martyria*) to the good news of Jesus Christ that they had learned and experienced as disciples. Luke picks up the story by again addressing Theophilus, reminding him that “*in the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from*

the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven.” (Acts 1:1-2). Luke offers a second account of the Ascension that is preceded by Jesus’ announcement to his disciples that *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (1:8). Over the next several days, the disciples wait obediently in Jerusalem for the promised empowerment of the Holy Spirit, restoring their number to twelve with the election of Matthias. They wait in confidence that Jesus’ promise will be fulfilled so that the Gospel story might continue through them.

Their waiting ends *“when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”* (2:1). Pentecost (“fiftieth day”) was used by Diaspora Jews for a day-long harvest festival more commonly known as the “Feast of Weeks” (*Shavuot*) and scheduled fifty days following Passover (*“You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour.”* – Exodus 23:16). Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage festivals when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God toward the nation.

It is on this day of celebration and thanksgiving that Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled; the reception of the Holy Spirit will enable the faith community to carry the inspired word about God’s risen Messiah to the entire household of Israel. It happens when *“suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”* (2:2). Wind (*pneuma*) was often a sign of the Spirit’s presence in the Old Testament (*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me...”* – Isaiah 61:1). Luke then reports that *“divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them”* (2:3), evoking the words of the psalmist praising the Lord who makes *“the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.”* (Psalm 104:4). The loud noise, wind, and fire evoke the theophanies (appearances of God) on Mt. Sinai to both Moses and Elijah:

- “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain

shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.” – Exodus 19:16-19.

- “He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” – 1 Kings 19:11-12.

The intent of the author *“is to create a vivid impression of the Spirit’s presence among the community of the Lord’s disciples its distinguishing mark.”* (Robert W. Wall), concluding with the bestowing of the “tongues of fire” (*glossai hosei pyros*) that heralds the gift the Holy Spirit and the ability to *“speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”* (2:4). This was a communal experience, for *“all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”*; the Holy Spirit is neither the private property of an enlightened few nor a transitory presence. *“This Spirit belongs to the people of God as their shared, permanent property.”* (Wall).

The impact of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment of the disciples to speak in the many languages previously unknown to them is immediately seen in the reaction of the *“devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.”* (2:5). While all the crowds were members of the nation of Israel, these were Jews of the Diaspora (“dispersion”) who lived outside of the Holy Land. While they would have learned Hebrew in their synagogue, their everyday language was that of the lands in which they lived; and at the sound of the disciples speaking, *the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.*” (2:6). Luke reports that at first they were *“amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’”* (2:7); Galileans were apparently notorious for their lack of linguistic talent. Their astonishment and confusion continue as they ask, *“how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”* (2:8). The catalogue of nations indicates that these Jews gathered in Jerusalem constitute an international assembly, fulfilling Jesus’ command that his apostles will be witnesses *“to the ends of the earth”* (1:8); it is in *“our own languages [that] we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (2:11). While many who experienced this Pentecost proclamation were *“amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ... others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”* (2:12-13). There is irony in the crowd’s mockery, as in the Old Testament “new wine” symbolized the joy and abundant blessings that

God would give God's people in the messianic age (*"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit."* – Amos 9:14). Jesus hinted that he himself would give the "new wine" of divine life (*"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son."* – Matthew 22:2).

- "The Jewish auditors, amazed and perplexed, recognize the community's familiar Galilean dialect. The language of the Spirit is not communicated with perfect or heavenly diction, free from the marks of human identity; it is the language of particular human groups, spoken in their idiom. God works in collaboration with real people – people who are filled with the Spirit to work on God's behalf in their own world." – Wall.

The confusion and mocking of the crowd become the occasion for Peter to rise and give his great Pentecost sermon, a *"Spirit-empowered witness to the risen Jesus [as] the means by which God's purposes are realized."* (Wall). This sermon is in the form of a Jewish *midrash* (commentary) on Scripture, pointing to the Hebrew Scriptures and how the words of the prophets have now been fulfilled. The miracle of *xenolalia* (speaking in foreign languages) has confused some in the crowd, producing a mocking retort rather than a faithful response. Peter addresses the crowd as *"men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listened to what I say"* (2:14). Peter defends the faith community against the charge that they were drunk; evidently in popular culture, "nine o'clock in the morning" was an hour inhabited only by those who intended no good (similar to "nothing good happens after 2:00 am"). Peter explains that what the household of Israel had experienced was in fact the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, which spoke of a time when *"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."* (2:17). Peter proclaims that Pentecost initiates Israel into a new epoch of God's salvation; events that fulfill biblical prophecy are in God's script of salvation. The community's forward movement toward God's eschatological horizon of a restored Israel is fundamentally a prophetic movement; *"Pentecost is fundamentally the pouring out of the Spirit of prophecy as a distinguishing mark of that movement."* (Wall).

While Peter points to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in his Pentecost sermon, he also redefines some of the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular that of the "day of the Lord" (*yom Yahweh*). In much of the Old Testament,

the “day of the Lord” was a fearsome day of judgment (*“Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? ... Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?”* (Amos 5:18-20). Now the “day of the Lord” is redefined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit with its promise of empowered witness and God’s salvation. The “day of the Lord” is now *“the Lord’s great and glorious day [when] everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (2:20-21). Peter’s proclamation is an anticipation of the universal scope of the church’s proclamation that will be fully understood at the Jerusalem Council, where Peter proclaimed that *“we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”* (15:11).

- “For now, with the advent of God’s new age made possible through a descendant of Abraham, ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ The promise of repentance, forgiveness and a life empowered by the Holy Spirit is ‘for you, for your children, and for all who are far away.’” – Karl Kuhn.

The story of the Spirit-inspired mission of the apostolic Church of Jesus Christ continues throughout the book of Acts as the Gospel message spreads to the surrounding regions to incorporate Jews of diverse nations and languages. It reaches beyond the Holy Land into Europe and Africa, and soon it overcomes barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles when Peter comes to the realization that *“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (10:34-35). It expands through the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who is appointed by the Lord as *“an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”* (9:15). Paul’s missionary journeys continue to expand the reach of the ministry of the Church until he finally arrives in Rome, the capital of the empire that crucified Jesus and continued to persecute Christ’s followers. But even Paul’s imprisonment in the imperial capital was not the end of the story; Luke’s final words report that Paul *“lived there for two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”* (28:30-31). The ending of the Acts of the Apostles is open-ended because the story of the Church that began at Pentecost continues to this day in the ministry of the *“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,”* the Church that continues to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). The story of the Church’s mission and ministry continues in every generation that endeavours to be faithful witnesses to the love of

God that is ours in Christ Jesus. No matter what obstacles it may face, we continue to believe and teach that *“at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Augsburg Confession). The story of the Church of Jesus Christ and its ministry continues because the need for the message it bears remains: the Church is *“sent out” (that is what the word apostolic means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for the world ... the mission of the church is of central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist.”* (Douglas John Hall). The story of the Church of Jesus Christ continues wherever and whenever it proclaims the Word of God; for *“the Word of God is a sure sign by which we may know where the church is.”* (Martin Luther, 1521).

Limited-series stories with firm endings have their place; but the story of the Church of Jesus Christ is one that will continue throughout the generations until the day the Lord arrives and our Saviour gathers us into our eternal home. It is our story whose ending has yet to be written; may we be faithful as we share the story that is the source of our life and hope, *“the old, old story of Jesus and his love.”*

Amen.