

May 28, 2023
Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“With One Voice”

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

In his most recent meeting with rostered leaders of the Eastern Synod on Zoom, Bishop Michael Pryse asked the participants what brings us joy in our professional and personal lives. The answers were as diverse as the participants, and while some struggled to provide an answer my response came quickly: for me, the greatest joy in my professional life is preaching, both in the preparation and delivery of sermons. In my personal life, my greatest source of joy is singing, which began when I was a member of the Junior choir in my home congregation and continued through high school, university, and seminary and I continue to find singing a great source of joy. While I have done some solo singing as well as singing in musical theatre, my primary involvement in singing has been with various choirs and choruses. Susan and I met in seminary choir, and we have sung in choruses in New Jersey and New York and are currently members of the Stratford Concert Choir. For me, joining my voice with other singers in presenting music that we have rehearsed for weeks brings a tremendous sense of joy and accomplishment, singing music from classical composers as well as great contemporary artists. Singing continues to give me great joy as I lift my voice along with other singers in praise of God and in celebration of the good gifts that God continues to shower upon us.

One important lesson I have learned in choirs over the years is the importance of blending voices so that the choir sings with one voice. While there are different vocal parts that make up a chorus, blending voices in harmony so that no one voice stands out is the goal of good choral singing. Joining together with one voice was also the blessing bestowed on the apostles on the day of Pentecost as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to begin the work of the Church in proclaiming the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Pentecost is one of three major festivals in the church year, the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit to inspire the apostles to continue his work after his ascension. In his final words before his departure, Jesus promises his followers 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.”* (Acts 1:8). Many consider Pentecost to be the birthday of the Church, the day when its mission to *“proclaim the mighty acts of*

him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9) begins on a day when “there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.” (Acts 2:5). On this day, “the reception of God’s Spirit enables the community to carry an inspired word about God’s risen Messiah to the entire household of Israel.” (Robert W. Wall).

Pentecost (“fiftieth day”) was a day when Diaspora Jews (those who lived outside of Jerusalem) gathered in the Holy City for a day-long harvest festival more commonly known as the “Feast of Weeks” (*Shavuot*), scheduled fifty days following Passover and celebrated according to the teachings in the Torah:

- “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).
- “You shall count seven weeks, begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the festival of weeks to the LORD your God, contributing a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the LORD your God. Rejoice before the LORD your God – you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levite resident in your towns, as well as strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you – at the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes.” – Deuteronomy 16:9-12.

Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage feasts when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God toward the nation. It also became a time of commemoration of God’s giving of the covenant and the law on Mount Sinai, the foundation upon which Israel was built as a people created through God’s covenant with Abraham and rooted in the teachings given to Moses which guided the nation as to how they were to live as God’s people. Pentecost was a day when the people of Israel gathered in the Holy City to “*give thanks to the Lord God as we celebrate the great unending mercy that he manifested on earth.*” (Martin Luther).

As people from across the Mediterranean world gather in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival, Luke reports that Jesus’ disciples “*were all together in one place*” (2:1). They are waiting together in obedience to Jesus’ command that they “*stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high*” (Luke 24:49). They

have been eyewitnesses to Jesus' teachings and miracles, and were eyewitnesses to his resurrection appearances; now, they are commissioned to be "witnesses" (*martyria*), to continue to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations after Jesus' ascension. But this apostolic ("sent out") ministry cannot begin until the apostles receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to accomplish what they cannot do on their own; so, for the next ten days following Jesus' ascension to heaven, the disciples remain in Jerusalem watching and waiting for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. All they accomplish in that time is to select Matthias as a replacement for Judas Iscariot among the Twelve; other than that, they embody Luther's teaching in the *Small Catechism* that "*by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.*" While they do not know how long the time of their waiting will be, they wait in trust and confidence that the one who has called them to wait is faithful and will fulfill what he has promised so that they might share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people.

It is while the apostles are faithfully waiting together that the gift of the Holy Spirit arrives ten days later, "*when the day of Pentecost had come.*" (2:1). The inbreaking of heaven into human affairs is a salient feature of Luke's narrative world in both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The promised Spirit arrives from heaven in dramatic fashion: "*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*" (2:2-3). The images of fire, clouds, and loud noises are like God's appearance before Moses at Mount Sinai ("*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.*" – Exodus 19:18). The wind is a sign of God's Spirit throughout the Bible, since both the Hebrew and Greek words for "spirit" (*ruah, pneuma*) also mean "wind." The sign of fire recalls John the Baptist's prophecy that the One to come "*will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" (Luke 3:16). The author's intent in this vivid description of the apostles' experience at Pentecost "*is to create a vivid impression of the Spirit's presence among the community of the Lord's disciples as its distinguishing mark.*" (Wall). The result of this vivid appearance of the Holy Spirit and the "tongues of fire" that rested on each of the apostles was that "*all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*" (2:4). The apostles are given the ability to speak in languages of which they had no prior knowledge, evidence of the empowerment of God's Spirit to allow them to begin their ministry as witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ to people of all nations and all languages. The result of this Spirit-empowered ability to witness is immediately seen in the Pentecost scene in the Holy City, where there were "*devout*

Jews from every nation under heaven.” While all in the crowd were Jews who would have learned the Torah in Hebrew, they were from many nations around the Mediterranean where their native tongues were local languages. While they immediately recognize their own languages, their initial response is bewilderment, because the people who were “*speaking in the native language of each*” (2:6) were Galileans, people with a distinct accent who were notorious at the time for their lack of linguistic talent. This is why Luke reports that “*amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’*” (2:7). The catalog of nations that follows indicates that these Jews constitute an international assembly; the entire household of Israel, “*both Jews and proselytes*” (2:10) is present to hear the inspired witness to God’s faithfulness to Israel. The ability to hear and understand the apostles’ proclamation also means that the ancient tragedy of Babel, where “*the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth*” (Genesis 11:9), has now been reversed. At Pentecost, “*the Spirit-given ability of Jesus’ disciples to speak in various languages signifies that God is beginning to overcome human divisions*” (William S. Kurz). The reaction of the crowd to this Spirit-inspired witness in the native languages of all the people gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost is varied: while Luke reports that “*all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’*” other dismiss the incident as evidence of the apostles’ being drunk: “*They are filled with new wine.*” (2:12-13).

This confusion leads Peter to stand up and speak on behalf of all the apostles. While he will be the one to deliver this great Pentecost sermon, all the apostles “*expressed themselves through one common voice, and he was the mouth of all. The Eleven stood by as witnesses to what he said.*” (Kurz). This is the first of many “missionary speeches” that take up almost one-third of the book of Acts, proclamations of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that continue the Spirit-inspired mission of the apostles. Peter’s speech is a Jewish *midrash* (commentary) on Scripture. Peter addresses the diverse crowd that consists of both “*men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem*” and invites them to “*let this be known to you and listen to what I say*” (2:14). He first addresses the accusation that the apostles are drunk; the miracle of *xenolalia* (speaking foreign languages) has confused these devout Jews, producing a mocking retort rather than a faithful response. Israel’s ignorance about their Messiah, which has provoked derision rather than confession, will be reversed only if they listen to the apostles’ message. “Listen” (*enotizomai*) literally means “let me place this word [the Word of God] into your ears.” Peter defends the community’s Pentecostal experience against the charge that it must be the result from a round of drunken debauchery: “*Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning*” (2:15). There is also irony in the mockery that the apostles are

“filled with new wine.” In the Old Testament, “new wine” symbolized the joy and abundant blessings that God would give his people in the messianic age:

- “On that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Wadi Shittim.” – Joel 3:18.
- “The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.” – Amos 9:13.

While their derisive words were delivered as mockery, the crowds were unwittingly witnessing to the fulfillment of God’s promises spoken through the prophets on the day of Pentecost; on this day, the “new wine” is the Holy Spirit, the gift of God’s love poured into human hearts (*“... because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* – Romans 5:5).

Peter then turns the crowd’s attention to the meaning of what they have experienced, that this Pentecost incident has been prophesied by the prophet Joel as an “outpouring of the Spirit” that inaugurates the “last days” of salvation’s history when “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”:

- “Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” – Joel 2:28-32.

Peter slightly modifies Joel’s original prophecy as speaking of this occurring *“in the last days”* (2:17), which will initiate Israel into a new epoch of God’s salvation history. Events that fulfill biblical prophecy are in God’s script of salvation. It will be a time when the entire membership of God’s people will receive the Spirit and speak like prophets; even household slaves shall be transformed into God’s servants and given important prophetic tasks to perform. The pouring out of the Spirit does not exclude even those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder; *“those who are named as receiving the pouring out of the Spirit are relatively powerless without the*

Spirit” (Jeremy L. Williams). Luke will later demonstrate that Christian prophets will include women as well as men (“*[Philip] had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy*” – 21:9); God’s Holy Spirit “*lives within every Christian and makes each one a son or daughter of God, empowered to act as God’s servant in word and deed.*” (Kurz).

The apostolic mission that began at Pentecost continues throughout the book of Acts as the gathering of disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to an ever-expanding audience of people who will also become disciples of Christ. The work begun on this day does not end at the conclusion of the book, for the Acts of the Apostles is open-ended because the mission continues today in the “*one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church*” that continues to be empowered by the Holy Spirit so that we might continue to join together as one church with one voice to proclaim the one holy Word of God that is meant to be shared as good news for all people in all times and in all languages, so that all may hear and believe the good news of the “*mighty acts of God.*”

- “At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, and with a mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire for a moment overcame human differences and united that diverse and dispirited company by the gift of understanding. They heard the good news as they were, where they were, and they were never the same again. Pentecost is many things – fire, wind, ecstasy, and renewal – but more than all that it is the Spirit whose gift is that of understanding, of knowing who and whose we are. We celebrate today once again that gift to them and to us, and we pray that what transformed them may transform us, and with us the world for God and Christ.” – Peter Gomes.

The joy that a choir experiences when they join with one voice to share glorious choral music is the joy we can experience when we live together as God’s faithful people, born anew in the waters of Holy Baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. As the church that continues to live and serve in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we continue to worship and serve together so that in word and deed we may with one voice share the good news of God’s love for us and for all the world.

Amen.