

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1-21

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Acts 2:1-21

(From *Homiletics*; “Babel Fish Church”, May 20, 2018)

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke stresses the continuity between Israel, Jesus and the church, and he does this to demonstrate that the God who brought salvation to his people in the OT continues to do it in the NT.

Acts lays great stress on the foreknowledge, will, purpose and plan of God -- for example, Peter points out in today's passage that the coming of the Holy Spirit "is what was spoken through the prophet Joel" (v. 16). "Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection, the descent of the Spirit, the growth of the church, the proclamation of the good news to the Gentiles -- none of this caught God off guard," observes biblical scholar W. Ward Gasque. Rather, our creating, saving, redeeming, inspiring God proves again and again that he is the Lord of all history ("A fruitful field," *Interpretation*, April 1988, 124).

These connections are made throughout the familiar yet fantastic story of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, as told by Luke in this week's text. Considerable scholarly ink has been spilled over precisely how Luke put together his account of this event -- much of it focusing on just where Luke got all the various components his version weaves together. But it is far more fruitful to look at the completed tapestry, in all its living color, than at all the individual threads that Luke may have used.

The first component in today's text recounts the actual descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. Luke begins by claiming that these still-faithful followers of Jesus were gathered "together in one place" (v. 1) -- a reference that seems to suggest they were still closeted in some closed and secretive "upper room." Although Luke himself does not make any explicit references to the mountaintop experience at Sinai, his portrayal of the power and movement of the Holy Spirit certainly recalls the sudden force of the divine presence before Moses. Whether Luke himself intended to evoke a Sinai-type image, or his original source had that event in mind, the effect is the same. Both the fire and the wind have numerous echoes among God's earlier prophets and servants in the OT.

As sweepingly universal as the power is behind these images, Luke is careful to include particularity. The "tongues" that are like fire sweep over all the disciples, but one flame rests "on each of them" (v. 3). The Holy Spirit's presence is felt personally as well as communally among all the gathered disciples.

What Luke describes as the immediate result of the descended Holy Spirit is a linguistic miracle. There is a difference between the kind of gift of language Luke reports these disciples experiencing on this day of Pentecost, and the later experiences of "glossolalia" Peter and Paul witness and in which they participate (see Acts 10:46; 19:6 and 1 Corinthians 12:10). While these later experiences of "glossolalia" require interpretation in order for any understanding of the Spirit-induced language, this first example of Spirit-powered language skills is one that provides interpretation. The disciples on Pentecost are apparently not speaking unknown or mysterious languages -- they are clearly communicating in the common human tongues known throughout the settled, civilized world. This event is a reversal of the Tower of Babel story from Genesis, in which God scrambled communication by giving people new and confusing languages (Genesis 11:1-9).

The purposive nature of the gift of tongues given at Pentecost is demonstrated by the subtle yet substantial shift in location Luke makes in verse 5. Suddenly the walls of that secluded upper room disappear from Luke's text. Somehow the Pentecost miracle is now taking place out in the open, public marketplace. The gathered witnesses to the linguistic miracle are more than just a random assortment of city dwellers. Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims present for the annual Jewish celebration of the grain harvest -- a festival that brought in visitors from every diaspora community. Luke's narrative expands this gathering to "every nation under heaven." The geographical information Luke provides in verses 8-11 serves to represent the presence of the whole world as witnesses to the Holy Spirit's first outpouring from the disciple community.

Furthermore, Luke's presentation of this experience of "tongues" at Pentecost is one of communication, not just interpretation. The Holy Spirit's first act is to empower the disciples, and the church, with voices that can speak to all the world. That there were later experiences of "glossolalia" or tongues-speaking that were not so intelligible to the audiences who heard them seems to be indicated by the sneering accusation by some that the disciples were simply drunk. Neither that accusation (v. 13) nor Peter's rejection of that conclusion (v. 15) seems to coincide with the kind of tongues-speaking described in verse 6. It is possible, then, that here Luke has put together two different occurrences of Spirit-inspired speech in order to give added strength to the final message he now wishes to voice about the Pentecost event.

Peter himself symbolizes and embodies yet another kind of language-gift the dancing flames of the Holy Spirit had imparted -- the power to turn the fearful and tongue-tied into vital witnesses for Christ's gospel. Peter, the most cowardly on the night of Jesus' arrest, now becomes the most communicative on the day of the Spirit's descent. Peter denies the charges of drunkenness and states the true meaning behind the multilingual, multicultural display the Pentecost event has produced.

Peter cites the profoundly inclusive prophecy of the ninth-century B.C. prophet Joel to describe the true nature of the new age that has now dawned with the Holy Spirit's arrival. The Joel text goes beyond the boundaries of nationality and geography to declare that there no longer will be any spiritual distinctions between men and women, old and young, servants and free or a special, spiritually gifted priesthood and the common laity. According to Joel's prophecy, which Peter invokes as evidence of the new age that has now begun, all are eligible to "prophecy" -- to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The gift at Pentecost is the stunning message of true equality and reciprocity among all people in the Spirit.

Ironically, this week's lectionary reading stops at verse 21 -- before Peter reveals the capstone to his message, indeed the real reason for a Pentecost event. Peter and the rest of the disciples -- whom we may now call "the church" -- have been invested with the power of this Holy Spirit so that they may speak about one thing: salvation through Jesus Christ. It is in verses 22-24 that Peter gives his first public witness about that message -- the person and power of Jesus Christ.

The gift of Pentecost bears its first fruit in the church's first public testimony about salvation through Christ crucified. The book of Acts proclaims that God is clearly the Lord of history, one who is bringing history to its final goal in Christ.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Acts 2:1-21

1. “What does this mean?” (v. 12). What better question could we ask than the one asked (and answered?) by the text itself? Pentecost has been described as the “birthday of the church,” an “origin story” for the Holy Spirit movement, a Christian take on a Jewish feast, an empowerment and calling to missionary efforts, a visionary reversal of the Tower of Babel story, and more. So...what do you think this means?
2. Consider these insights and questions from Amy G. Oden, *workingpreacher.org* (June 9, 2019) and how they might inspire our connections with our neighbors: *“This gift of the Holy Spirit that marks the birth of the church is a gift expressly for those outside the Jesus movement, those who had lived displaced in a language-world not their own. We cannot miss this! It is a spiritual gift given not for the disciples themselves, but for the outsiders listening. God’s gift reaches outward to those outside of this immediate circle of Jesus followers. It seems that one mark of the Holy Spirit’s gifting is that it empowers us to connect to others...[so] What language would you speak in your missional location, if you were filled with the Holy Spirit? How might those outside your congregation hear their mother tongue and be welcomed home? ...Consider the native language of those outside your congregation: Can we ask the Holy Spirit to gift us with such native languages?”*
3. In vv. 17-21, Peter quotes from the Septuagint (Greek) version of Joel 2:28-32. It is always interesting to observe how the characters in the New Testament use scripture. So take a look at the passage Peter quotes in Joel. How does his choice suit his purposes on the day of Pentecost, and what does it reveal about his theological perspective? How has Peter amended the scripture and why? Is his use of scripture consistent with your own?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?