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“What Does This Mean?”

Acts 2:1-21; John 14:15-20

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

“And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” Amazed and perplexed sounds like a fitting response to tongues of fire resting on the heads of the disciples – as well as everyone, from every nation, suddenly hearing these disciples speak to them in their own native languages. I suspect even the disciples were experiencing more than a little amazement and perplexity themselves – even though Jesus had told them to expect something like this. Before He had ascended, Jesus had said to them: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*¹ And now, here it was, just as Jesus had said. Power from on high – and the Gospel being proclaimed in a multitude of languages representing, as it were, *“all the earth.”*

But if “amazed and perplexed” is a fitting response on the part of the crowd to what they were seeing and hearing, so too is the question the crowd then raises: *“What does this mean?”* *“They’re drunk!”* cries out someone in the crowd – there’s just always someone like that in the crowd, someone who just refuses to let a miracle be a miracle. So, to answer that false explanation, and to give the right explanation, Peter (under the power of the Holy Spirit) addresses the crowd. He connects the amazing and perplexing events of the day first to an Old Testament prophecy from Joel; and then, and even more importantly, to the recent events regarding the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. So powerful was Peter’s preaching – or rather, we should say, so powerful was the Holy Spirit working through Peter’s preaching – that around three thousand souls were converted to Jesus right there on the spot.

But in the centuries since, even for those like us who have long believed in Jesus and in the events described on the day of Pentecost, that question – *“What does this mean?”* – is still an important question. For, the truth is, the events of Pentecost reach into the Old Testament even beyond the prophecy of Joel. And the events of that day connect also to some other things Jesus had said before His crucifixion and resurrection. This morning I want to look at just three of those connections.

The first Pentecost connection has to do with the original Festival of Pentecost in the Old Testament. Long before Pentecost became a New Testament celebration, it was a Jewish festival dating all the way back to the time of Moses. Through the centuries it had come to be observed by the Jews as primarily an agricultural festival. But the roots of the Hebrew Pentecost lie in the story of their deliverance from out of slavery in Egypt. Remember the night of the Passover, when the angel of death passed over the Israelites whose homes were marked by the blood of the lamb

– that night when Pharaoh finally relented and let God’s people go. So off went Israel, out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and into the Sinai desert beyond. And then, on the fiftieth day of their exodus, they came to Mt. Sinai. And then, on that fiftieth day, Moses went up the mountain to receive from God the Ten Commandments – which laid out for Israel how they were now to live as God’s saved people. So, fifty days after God had brought salvation to His people Israel, God gave to His people instruction on how to live as God’s people.

And now here in the New Testament, at the annual observance of this Old Testament Pentecost, God gives this Old Testament observance a new, New Testament meaning. It had been fifty days since Jesus was crucified and then risen from the dead – God’s gift of an even greater salvation, this time from out of our slavery to sin and death, and given to all the peoples. And on this day of Pentecost – the day commemorating when Moses went up the mountain and come down with the Law, on this day, with Jesus having already ascended to God up in heaven, down comes the power of the Holy Spirit – the power of God which will at last enable His people to obey the Law. The power of God which enables us actually to live as those who have been saved by God.

Fifty days after Israel’s salvation from slavery in Egypt, God gives to them instruction on how to live in light of their salvation. But the problem with the Old Testament Law was that while it gave instruction, it did not give the power to overcome temptation and to obey. Now, fifty days after Christ our Passover has died to save us from our slavery to sin and death, God gives the Holy Spirit – which is, at last, the power needed for us truly to be transformed, truly to keep the Law, truly to live as those who have indeed been set free from sin and death. What the first Passover promised with the giving of the Law, the second Passover fulfills with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit has come, we now truly can be changed – can be no longer conformed to the world around us, but transformed by the renewal of our hearts in the Holy Spirit.

Because the Holy Spirit has come, says this first Old Testament Pentecost connection, we now have the power to be changed – to become what Jesus is calling us to become. Look no further than Peter himself for proof. Cowardly, faithless Peter, who denied Jesus three times rather than face the scorn of the crowd², now stands up before that crowd and fearlessly, faithfully proclaims what he was afraid to proclaim on the night of Jesus’ arrest. He proclaims that he belongs to Jesus. He proclaims that salvation is found only in Jesus. He proclaims that Jesus is the One we have been waiting for, searching for, all our lives. Peter the coward becomes Peter the brave. And what is the meaning of that transformation? Simply that the Holy Spirit has come upon him and made him brave, made him faithful, made him new.

And the meaning of Pentecost for us still today is that God has given us, like Peter, the power we need to be changed, to keep the Law, to live the way and the truth and the life Jesus has set before us as the people He has redeemed. What Pentecost means for us is that we have no excuse for not being changed, keeping the Law, or living the way and the truth and the life Jesus has set before us. God has now given us what we need, the power we require in order to be transformed, in order to be no longer conformed. Even to stand up before the world like Peter and acknowledge that we belong to Christ – and that we are seeking to lead a different sort of life because of that belonging to Christ. As Thomas Merton once put it: *“As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so [the Holy Spirit] concentrates the rays of God’s light and fire to a point that*

sets fire in the spirit of man.”³ That’s the first connection, deeper meaning, of Pentecost for us this morning – we can be changed. We can now live as Christ is calling us to live. We now have the power to let go of what we have been, the Holy Spirit power to become what the Lord requires.

The second Pentecost Old Testament connection is the Tower of Babel. Remember the story. Following the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden – their rebellion against God and His good intentions for them – everything just got worse and worse. Cain murders Abel, Noah builds an ark while God tries to wipe the stain of sin away from His creation. And then comes the Tower of Babel, where our unchastened, arrogant rebellion against God unites humanity in an attempt to build a tower all the way to heaven – there to throw God down from His throne. And God not only dashes that little bitty tower to pieces, but scatters humankind across the face of the earth, confusing their languages as they go – so that never again can humankind unite in sinful conspiracy against their Maker.⁴

But that scattering, that disunity, that multiplying of tongues and cultures and national borders was never God’s intention for life on this earth. And, in sending Jesus Christ, God begins the work of reuniting humankind together once again – the way it was supposed to be: one people, one all-encompassing Kingdom, one unified voice praising God. What He had covenanted with Abraham shortly after the events of Babel – a promise that through one people (Israel) He would one day reach out to bless all the peoples – is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, who is born of that one people, Israel, but who dies and rises again in order to bring salvation to all the peoples.⁵ As Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, God’s purpose “*set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*”⁶

And so it is on Pentecost that everyone hears, as one people, the one story of our common salvation in Jesus Christ. Mede and Elamite and Parthian alike, all hear of the mighty work of God in Jesus – a sign, if you will, of what is to come on that final day, when all of God’s people are one people once again. That’s the second meaning of Pentecost – Babel reversed. And even though our world, on the surface, may still seem a great deal more like Babel than Pentecost, we only have to look below the surface to see that God is working out His purpose to unite all things. This very morning, in every land and in every tongue – whether in war or in peace, whether in dictatorship or democracy, whether in first world or third – Christ is being praised, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost is spreading the fire of God’s love, and the Church Universal is at worship. If we could but for an instant see this, hear this, as it is seen and heard in heaven, we should be filled with a joy bigger than our hearts could hold. A sight, a sound which brings even the angels to their knees in praise before the throne of the One who is uniting all things in Christ Jesus.

But the truth is we can hear this, we do see at least a portion of this every single Sunday, right here in these pews – God’s Pentecost reversal of Babel. God’s plan to unite all peoples into one in Christ Jesus. It’s going on right here in this sanctuary, right this very moment. For though we may not be a people from every land and every tongue, we are nonetheless strangers who have been brought together as a holy communion by Christ, who have been bonded to one another as brother and sister in the shared love of Jesus Christ. And every time we worship with one another, pray for one another, put up with one another for Jesus’ sake, take care of one another – Pentecost beats back Babel. And the Holy Spirit comes afresh upon our fellowship.

I came across this a while back – one pastor’s description of seeing just this Holy Spirit uniting power at work in his own church, just the way I see it working here. He’s addressing this to his congregation in a newsletter:

Last November, on the Sunday after news spread about Don’s cancer returning, you remember how our prayers took on a life of their own. We were sitting in the quiet, waiting to see if anyone wanted to pray, when Miss Nelson stood up slowly, gripped her walker, and worked her way across the aisle to Don. Then she laid her hands on Don’s shoulders and began her slow, earnest prayer. She asked God to take away the cancer, to give the doctors wisdom and “supernatural skill.” Eventually she paused, then finished: “Now God, I don’t want to tell you how to do your business, but I’m gonna remind you how much we love Don here, how much we need him with us.”

As Miss Nelson returned to her pew, most of us were wiping our eyes. I was supposed to deliver the [sermon] next, but even a knucklehead like me could sense how imperceptive it would be to launch into a text when we were sharing such a holy presence. I stood at the pulpit for a moment or two and then closed my Bible. In the silence, Miss Nelson spoke up. “I think we should all gather around Don for a few minutes.” And we did. We circled up and hugged Don, more than a few of us sniffing and brushing away tears. It was beautiful . . .⁷

At the church, we are the people (whenever we live true to ourselves) who will welcome you into this world, who will join you in marriage and in friendship, who will bless your coming and your going. We will pray for you to prosper and know love’s depths, even if you think our prayers are foolish or offered in vain, and we will mourn you when you leave us. We will . . . grieve together through tragedy and heartache. We will celebrate, with you, everything beautiful and good, everything that comes from the hand of mercy. And then, when your days conclude, we will bury you. We will return you to the earth and pray God’s kindness over you.

This is who we are. This is who I hope we will continue to be.⁸

And the only thing I would add to that is to say that this is what Pentecost means still to us today. That the real miracle of Pentecost wasn’t the speaking in tongues, but the greater promise that the speaking in tongues represented – Babel overcome, God’s purpose to unite all things in Christ Jesus breaking into this world. And the birth of the Church – the communion we share with Christians here, and with Christians in every land, through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and among us to make us one, to make the one family of God.

The third Pentecost connection, the New Testament connection. Pentecost connects us directly to something else Jesus had said to His disciples. As we read from John’s gospel, as

Jesus was preparing to go to the cross and, after the resurrection, back up into heaven, He said to His disciples, “*I will not leave you as orphans.*” And pointing to what would happen on Pentecost, He continued: “*In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*”

“*You in me, and I in you*” – meaning that He has not left us as orphans. That, in fact, He has not left us at all. Through His Holy Spirit, He is with us always, just as He promised. And we are not alone. We are not ever alone. Pentecost means what whatever we must face – whether of joy or of sorrow or of anything in between – we do not face it alone. We are not spiritual orphans. But, instead, with Christ beside us, Christ before us, Christ behind us – Christ within us. And the power of His Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts is the very power which shall sustain us and guard us and bring us round to good in all things. This also is what Pentecost means: we are not alone. We are not ever all on our own.

So, let me end with a Pentecost prayer – in fact, one of the oldest Pentecost prayers of the church of Jesus Christ:

*Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest,
Vouchsafe within our souls to rest.
Come with thy power and heavenly aid,
And fill the hearts which thou hast made.*

¹ Acts 1:8.

² Luke 22:33-34, 54-62.

³ Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.150.

⁴ Genesis 11:1-9.

⁵ Genesis 12:1-3.

⁶ Ephesians 1:9-10.

⁷ Winn Collier, Love Big, Be Well (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), p. 135.

⁸ Collier, p. 121.