



PENTECOST

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Gary V. Simpson

Senior Pastor, Concord Baptist Church of Christ and Assistant Professor of Homiletics,
Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, NJ

Lection - Acts 2:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (v. 2) 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. (v. 3) Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. (v. 4) All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (v. 5) Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. (v. 6) And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (v. 7) Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? (v. 8) And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This simple gathering in Jerusalem fifty days after the crucifixion of Jesus is a defining moment for believers and for the gospel. Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Until this moment in history, the faith, known as “the Way,” is an assemblage of eleven refugees from Galilee. Their transformation and the transformation of the world are initiated by the great event spoken of in today’s lectionary scripture. This is a monumental, paradigm-changing event. From this event, we make the bold assertion: The Christian Church cannot and would not exist without the power and the presence of the Holy Ghost.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 2:1-8

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

The Holy Spirit has always fascinated me. Growing up I longed for the Spirit of Pentecost to come into the worship setting and “set the congregation on fire.” Today, as a pastor at Concord Baptist Church of Christ and as a professor, I am more aware of the numerous ways the Holy Spirit comes into people’s lives and affects positive change. No longer is my understanding of Pentecost simply wrapped around the phonetic languages we speak out of our mouths. Rather, I am aware of the many ways the Holy Spirit speaks through us and to us through sounds, pictures, ideas and even hope. It is with these ideas in mind that the true importance of Pentecost Sunday is highlighted. Pentecost is not simply a day to remember the birth of the Church, but it is also a way of remembering our commitment to open ourselves to change the world and be changed by the world with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Proximity does not guarantee power. We are not strong simply because we gather in the same room. In addition to proximity, there is the dynamic of communion, or as the Latina/o theologians describe it, *communitas*.¹ Shared space does not produce power. Look at our communities and the people with whom we share space for residence and worship. We are an assembly but sometimes disconnected. We need synergy; we need “synchronized energy.” We need assurance that the Holy Spirit is not merely “raw spiritual energy” but divinity with personality. The Holy Spirit is not merely a power source but God willing to be in radical relationship with believers to affect the power structures of the world.

Because the Holy Spirit is personality, we cannot, of our own doing, produce or create the optimum circumstances for holy encounter. The scripture says, “Suddenly.” We are called to the assembly and to live in the expectation that, at any moment, God can choose to make the person and personality of the Holy Spirit manifest.

There is a subtle ambiguity in this text. There seems to be a stage direction missing. After the encounter with the Holy Spirit in verse 4, the scene shifts to the larger context of Jerusalem where we see devout Jews from all over the known world. The long list of travelers and their identities are worth noting. In order to appreciate this fully, you may want to view a map of the Ancient Near East and see from whence these have travelled. This was a cosmopolitan event. (Please note in the census of who was present, the oft overlooked phrase, “*a few strangers from Rome.*”)

The most amazing part of this text was the ability that the Galileans appear to have to speak the birth language of all those they encountered. We see yet another mysterious manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s power. Did the Holy Spirit suddenly give the disciples a “Rosetta Stone” crash course in the languages of the known world, or did the power and presence of the Holy Spirit do something transformative to the sound itself so that, as Galileans spoke Galilean, it was instantly interpreted into the listener’s native tongue? Gardner Taylor speaks of this dynamic when he describes the slave’s response to the gospel, even though white slave masters were trying to use the scripture and sacred

stories to make slaves complacent, cooperative and constricted. They were told one thing, “Slaves obey your masters!” But they heard another, “The ones I have set free are free indeed!”

Has the church had this experience/encounter with the Holy Spirit only to serve itself? If so, it is in effect like having an implosion of power causing the church to fall in on itself.² Or does the church, a sequestered space, with this power go out into the larger community with renewed power? Are these devout Jews in Jerusalem of verse 5 a part of those who have had the cloven tongues of fire on their head, or do they encounter the fired up ones after the event has taken place? The text is somewhat vague here, but what we can be sure of is that the Holy Spirit is somehow linked to our ability to promote discipleship throughout the world. One gives power to the other.

In any community there are several languages spoken. I am not merely speaking of tongues and dialects but also of love languages, need languages, dream languages, and destructive dialects. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit gives the Church the ability to carry out its mission without pretense or pretext amidst a multi-lingual world. The activity of the Church is not derived from strategic study or data analysis of the surrounding communities. It is by the Church being relentless in its duty to be witnesses for the cause of Christ. That story is so large, and its reach so vast, that there is a place for every encounter we have to find residence in the house of faith.

This is the nature and necessity of the Holy Ghost in transformative language. The gospel story has no portability or power if it gets trapped in the language and capacity or ability of the witnesses alone. Our sermons have no possibility of being heard if there is no transformation of our small thoughts, sketchy ideas and fuzzy dreams to express the good news. We who preach need that translation so that our words are heard in the native language of our listeners. That is the role of the Holy Spirit in every sermon and in all the work we do with those who are different than us--to interpret.

Celebration

We are called by the circumstance of the Church’s birth to wrestle with the language we use to communicate the gospel so that our experiences are more than mere personal jubilation. Being “caught up” in the Spirit provides the power the Church needs to engage the world with Holy boldness. By the time the Book of Acts arrives at its 17th chapter, it is being declared of the apostles and their heirs in the gospel, “These are they who have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Praise God that we also have this boldness, and the audacity to speak to all nations. We can do no less because of the Spirit that drives us and the Lord who saved and keeps us.

Descriptive Details

The language in this text is both relational and multisensory. The Spirit moves--we hear sounds and see sights which force us into a situation of awe and submission, and extreme reverence.

Sights: “Cloven tongues.” The Holy Spirit is unwilling to differentiate the people who are present. The tongues appear on every head present; all are called into Pentecost; and

Sounds: “Suddenly a noise” -- some translations insert the word, “violent” noise. Growing up in the Midwest, when I read this text I hear the fury of a tornado and remember the “freight train like” noise of the tornado as it swept through our community. I imagine a similar sound filled the place where they met on Pentecost.

Notes

1. Bond, Gilbert I. Community, Communitas and Cosmos: Toward a Phenomenological Interpretation and Theology of Traditional Afro-Christian Worship. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003.
2. Simpson, Gary V. “Preaching with Power: Moving from Texts and Ideas to Sermons that Move with Passion.” The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption: Essays in Honor of James Melvin Washington. Quinton Dixie and Cornel West, Ed. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999.