

“My Spirit Poured Out on Young and Old”

Acts 2:17-24/Joel 2:28-32

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Today we “officially” begin a series called “My Spirit Poured Out on Young and Old.”

I say “officially,” because Cindy introduced us to today’s text last week. We know this text that Mark read. We know it well from Pentecost, that day of great gatherings.

Now we have nearly 2000 years of history since that Pentecost. We think of Pentecost as a day of great hope and joy, an ecumenical coming together of Christians matched only by World Communion Sunday. As I grew up in Iowa, I remember the Mid-Prairie Council of Churches would have a community worship service in the local gymnasium. We’re all warm and fuzzy as we thank God for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But as I was thinking about this story this week, that’s not the picture I was imagining. I didn’t picture gobs of people coming together on a post-Easter high. Instead, I read the story of 120 people gathered in a space, wondering what will happen without their leader. The church of Jesus Christ is 120 people, folks – that’s less than what we have here today.

It’s not 2000 years after the resurrection when they have gathered. It’s 50 days. It’s not 2000 years after Jesus ascended into heaven. It’s only 10 days! Peter, Petros, the rock on which Jesus build his church, instead had just had his own world rocked. The man Peter had followed for three years was gone, first killed but then resurrected, and now off to heaven, “lifted up and taken out of sight.”

Think of how you feel when you’ve lost your leader or experienced a tragedy.

- This past November, CNN and other channels broadcast shows talking about the funk that our country was put into, 50 years after John F. Kennedy was shot. Many people, but perhaps especially Irish Catholics, were stunned with the news that their charismatic Camelot had been killed.

- A few years later, it was Martin Luther King, Junior, and the response in the African-American community was similar. I was too young to remember that day, but even a few years ago when I went to the national historic site in Atlanta that remembers his life, I was still deeply affected.

When transformational events happen in our corporate lives, we need a word from a trusted leader, perhaps a word with a pastoral tone.

- When President Ford was inaugurated following Richard Nixon’s resignation, he comforted a country by saying that “Our long, national nightmare is over.”
- When President Bush first spoke following 9/11, he quoted from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.
- And when President Obama stepped to the mic following the shootings in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, his first paragraph reminded us that we “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

We need these words from our leaders.

And on Pentecost, Peter comes through. He’s a fisherman without much training, but he follows the lead of the master. When Jesus began his public ministry in Luke 4, it says that he was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” not a coincidence in relation to today’s text.

And Jesus went straight to the chase. He quoted the familiar passage from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

It was a text his hearers knew well.

Luke and Acts are written by the same author – in book one, the author lets Jesus’ sermon in chapter 4 set the stage. In the book of Acts, Luke turns the microphone over to Peter.

And Peter follows Jesus’ lead. Peter sermon is one of the longest among the 24 sermons Luke records in the book of Acts. As he spoke, Peter went to what the people knew. The text \_\_\_\_ read is from Acts, but it quotes the prophet Joel. We’re used to hearing it from Acts, but this morning, I’d like to step back and explore a bit of the original context, and what this text might have meant to Peter’s hearers.

Like the rabbis of his day, Peter probably saw the Joel passage as referring to God’s final intervention in history. Joel is a short book, so though this segment comes from the end of the second chapter, it’s actually as close to the end of the book as to the beginning.

We don’t know exactly when Joel wrote, but it’s in a time of crisis. There has been a severe locust plague, combined with drought, so serious that it lasts more than a year. The survival of God’s people in Jerusalem and Judah is in question, not unlike what God’s people gathered in the upper room at Pentecost would have felt.

The locusts Joel speaks of could be a metaphor for something greater. In Deuteronomy chapter 28, locusts are seen as a curse for disobedience, and of course we remember the eighth plague, when Moses called down locusts upon Egypt.

And so, in the first half of the book, Joel writes exhortations. He gives warnings, and he makes appeals to turn back to God. Last week, Cindy spoke of how the followers were accused of being drunk – perhaps that’s an intentional metaphor that Luke uses, because Joel’s first call is to the drunkards, those that have become blind to the world around them because of their intoxication.

Joel’s next vision is of an impending army, a metaphor that would have made perfect sense to Peter’s listeners, living in fear of the Roman Empire.

In verse 15 of chapter 1, Joel says “the day of the Lord is coming,” a phrase that Joel uses a lot and that Jesus uses as well.

In chapter 2, Joel continues with the “day of the Lord” theme, again with visions of an invading army. In verses 12-17, he issues a call to repentance, and then to community lament. Later in the chapter, Joel promises God’s response to the troubles facing his listeners. In verse 19, he says, “I will send grain, wine, and oil and you will be satisfied. I will remove the army from you.”

And in the words right before today’s quoted material, God says, “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God.”

Words of comfort. These are exactly the kinds of words that Peter has heard Jesus say in the past three years, even if Peter didn’t always get it.

So as Peter quotes Joel, he draws upon vivid and powerful images that would have been familiar to his listener.

Now Peter messes a little bit with the words of Joel, perhaps emphasizing even more the apocalyptic nature of Joel’s words. Peter says, “In the last days, . . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophecy, and your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones will dream dreams.”

This morning, I’m not going to focus so much on HOW God’s Spirit might be poured out – I think we’ll get more of that in the weeks to come. Instead, I’d like to focus on how we should respond when God’s spirit is poured out among us. When God’s Spirit is poured out, there will be prophecy, dreams, and visions, Joel and Peter say.

To prophecy, to dream dreams, to see visions, according to Lloyd Ogilvie, are “three related manifestations of an immediate and close relationship to God, where God communicates God’s word to individuals, who communicate it to others.”

We miss the meaning of prophecy, Ogilvy says, if we think of it primarily of foretelling the future. “It’s not fore-telling, but forth-telling, that is, *proclaiming God’s word*.” Prophecy is based on two things – a vital knowledge of God and deep insight into the condition of the people around us.

Probably 45 Sundays a year or so, Neil, or Cindy, or Velma, or me, stand up here and proclaim the word. We prophecy, you could say. But the gift of prophecy is for all people – it is both our right and it is our responsibility. Paul puts the gift of prophecy next to the gift of love among the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:1. You might not recognize that reference immediately, but let me read it in context, without chapter breaks: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love and the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophecy.” Two verses later, Paul says, “those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.”

The notion of prophecy might not be attractive to us. When we think of prophets, we might of old guys in robes, telling stories of judgment and woe. But let me give a few examples of prophecy – from a child, and from two young women.

- A child prophesied through action in John, chapter 6. There, a boy – or maybe a girl, the Greek text actually isn't clear – shows that actions are sometimes louder than words when she offers five loaves and two fishes, proclaiming to the world that there's “enough for all, if we would learn to share it.”
  - As Mennonites, we can like this story. After all, we are the quiet in the land, and this sounds like a potluck. We can do this. We like that quote that's sometimes attributed to Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.”
- But sometimes, we must prophecy with our words. Perhaps we must prophecy to challenge authority. Consider the words of a young woman, an unwed teenager about to become a mother – a woman who could have been killed for her situation. *Sing the Journey*, No. 13, has a great melody, one that has brought me to tears at times. “And holy is his name.” But listen to the rest of the Magnificat – it's a prophetic challenge to the principalities and powers:

“He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

  - If you're like me, it's easy to discount the possibility of making such a statement. After all, these words are from Mary, the one anointed by God to carry the Messiah. We couldn't be expected to prophecy in such a way that will be remembered for the ages.
- So let me offer one more. I think that sometimes the best way of prophesying is simply to state our beliefs for others to hear. A highlight for me each spring is to listen to the faith statements of those in the senior Bible class at Bethany. This spring, I had the opportunity to hear Katie Hurst say the following:

I believe that God is all around us, all the time, and we encounter her in different ways. I don't believe God is a person with a specific gender, sitting on a cloud with a beard and a throne. I also don't believe that God is a vending

machine, where you put in a prayer and get everything you want, and a bag of chips! My God is love, ...wonder, ...joy, ...pain, ... and refuge. She can be found in all of these things and can be shown *through* them. I believe that by loving others, and letting ourselves be loved, we encounter what can only be compared to a sliver of the love that God has for us. When we find the joy in life and are overcome by the beauty of it all—that is only a fraction of God’s joy when we choose him.” Amen.

In the coming weeks, we as pastors want to make some special opportunities for you to prophecy to the community. In your *Buzz* today is an article that describes the worship series we are beginning.

On Sunday morning, you will be hearing a lot of varied voices. Neil will preach, and so will Mike, but you will also hear from others in the congregation:

- On one Sunday, you’ll hear the prophetic words of senior adults in the congregation as they talk about how they have experienced the spirit being poured out upon them.
- Another day you will hear children.
- On one day, you’ll hear both, when some grandparents and grandchildren share together.
- After our service/learning trip, you will hear the experiences of MYFers who have had the opportunity to see God at work in new ways in Chicago.
- And it’s not officially part of the series, but I’m looking forward to a Sunday in August, when we hear and see the statements of those being baptized.

And then there’s you. The article in the *Buzz* also describes three other ways in which your prophetic voice can be heard:

- Last week, we talked about how Peter and his friends probably didn’t have a bulletin. Well, in your bulletin today is an insert that will be there each week. We invite you to take it home and write a story of how you’ve experienced God’s spirit being poured out.

- Now, not only did Peter not have a bulletin, but he also didn't have email. But we do. So you can also share your stories by email, by sending them to an address we have set up -- [pouredout@waterfordchurch.org](mailto:pouredout@waterfordchurch.org)
- And Peter certainly wasn't on Facebook. But we are -- ...

Prophesy, my friends. Tell to each other and to the coming generation “the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.” For God has poured out the Spirit upon all flesh, young and old, slave and free, women and men. Amen.