

Distributed Power (Acts 2:1-21)

I want to thank those who participated in our scripture reading today as they gave a glimpse of what the original crowd experienced during this fascinating moment of God's story recorded in Acts 2. This was a remarkable event that the church remembers annually and in our review of this moment, we're often captured by strangeness of it, the multiple languages that erupted among the Apostles and others with them who had received a visible marker of the Spirit's presence. As extraordinary as these are, if we focus only on this, we run the risk of missing the larger story this moment introduces. There are elements to this we want to capture, but it will help if we set the stage so that we can see why it plays out the way it did.

In the Jewish faith, Pentecost was one of three annual festivals observed by the people of God. One was Passover, the other Tabernacles, and Pentecost was actually called First Fruits, as it celebrated the initial harvest of crops as a thank offering to God. Each of these festivals required all males to show up in Jerusalem to observe it. Since many came from long distances, because First Fruits occurred 50 days after Passover, they remained in Jerusalem during that time. So Jerusalem's population swelled around these two festivals. That this happened then is clear from the list of languages recorded in our text. People in the crowd that gathered in Jerusalem were from Asia, provinces of the Roman Empire from the North, Media, provinces of the Parthian Empire from the east, the city of Rome and the island of Crete, from the west, from Cyrene and Egypt in Africa from the southwest, Arabia to the southeast, and Judea, the southern portion of ancient Israel. Jews had arrived from far-flung places to celebrate these two annual festivals.

In citing these language groups representing the geographic spread from which these people came, Luke not only amplifies the miraculous ability of the Apostles and the others with them to speak in different languages present then, he also means to connect this to Jesus' promise and charge to the Apostles given just 10 days prior at the time of his ascension—the event we considered last week. You'll recall that Jesus had told them that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria (formerly the northern kingdom of ancient Israel), and to the end of the earth—that is, to all the compass points of the globe. And in one cataclysmic moment, that promise began to be fulfilled represented by the crowd that gathered around this event. That promise continued to unfold in the history of the church that followed as people traveled throughout the Empire and beyond with the message of Jesus, but it got a huge jump-start in this remarkable event.

But remember also the first part of Jesus' promise: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you..." So immediately we ask the question: what power did the Apostles and the others with them in that upper room receive? The particular power they received in the moment was the ability to convey the wonders of God in languages known to those in the gathered crowd, but previously unknown to the speakers. They were able to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead which marked the beginning of the messianic age ushering in a new awareness of the

presence of God's kingdom—always present, but now accessible in ways that were new and fresh. The question that might follow asks why it was important for them to receive **this** particular power? Remember that the gathered crowd was international in scope—though they were Jews, and the language of faith in Judaism was Hebrew, they were likely a bit rusty in their Hebrew given that it wasn't their native language. They probably had a working knowledge of Greek which was widespread, but languages have their own nuances, and since language conveys ideas, the point was to make the message clear in the thought process and idiosyncracies of the gathered crowd. I grew up in a family that spoke German, though as I grew, English gradually became the norm. Every now and again my dad would try to tell me and my sister a German joke in English, and when we didn't get it he would say, "Well, it loses in translation." Which is true—language just doesn't translate ideas, it interprets them. So the point of the languages on that Pentecost day was to get the message across so that it didn't lose any of its punch in translation. And though that was true for the immediate hearers of the message on that day, there was a larger purpose unfolding as well.

Those who had gathered in Jerusalem for these two festivals would soon be returning home, many of them now followers of Jesus as a result of their response to the message on Pentecost. Later in this passage we learn that 3000 became followers of Jesus that day, a few days later another 2000 became followers. That's 5000 new followers of Jesus, a large percentage of whom would now return home to far-flung regions carrying with them the message of Jesus so that the kingdom would be realized over a vast region in a short period of time.

Friends, this was Jesus making good on his promise to the Apostles. The Spirit enabled their ability to communicate; the Spirit also inspired the message. You'll recall that the Apostles did not know when the promised power would come, nor how it would come, nor what it would look like. Prior to Pentecost they weren't feverishly searching the Scripture compiling notes of what they should say. They were praying, waiting in openness for what was to come, whatever that was.

In the moment, the Spirit created the opportunity and gave them the insight to pull together references from their faith history to corroborate the moment's event. That combined with their personal experiences, their witness to the fact of Christ's resurrection was all that was needed to set in motion the outcome that corresponded with God's purpose unfolding in that moment.

How does this connect to us today? I'm sure much of this is already emerging in your thought so let me agree with you that the same Spirit unleashed among that first Pentecost gathering is working within and among us today. The Spirit that dwelled within the believers then is the Spirit that indwells you. The purpose towards which the Spirit moved in that day is the same purpose the Spirit continues to move forward in our day. Nothing about this has changed—the Spirit is still bringing about the outcome God desires for all. The promise Jesus gave to his followers then—of power and opportunity—remains for his followers today. Christ's promise to them is also Christ's

promise to you. The opportunities today are different than they were at that exact moment. Opportunities change with time and circumstance—our call isn't to duplicate that same moment, but to respond to our moments with the same confidence they had in theirs. They recognized their moment and followed the Spirit's lead as it developed, and it is ours to recognize our moments and follow the Spirit's lead in them. The power they received met the need presented to them. The ability the Spirit provides is always available to us and moves according to the need emerging before us. The thing to remember is that the Spirit moves—our tendency is to settle, but the Spirit moves. When we sense a lack of power in what we're pursuing, it may be that the Spirit has moved beyond us, beckoning us forward while we hang back trying to recapture power we once knew. The means for remaining in step with the Spirit, for preparing to move with and in the Spirit is the same for us as for them. Remember that prior to the Spirit's outpouring on Pentecost, the group of Christ followers, 120 in all according to Acts 1:15, were praying in openness inviting whatever was next. You can be swept up in the Spirit's move as you pray: How do you want to move your purpose forward through me today? It's a simple enough prayer, but it lays the foundation for profound outcomes.

We will discover constantly expanding outcomes as we follow the Spirit's lead through and beyond our circles of influence. These can come in the form of personal outcomes: how are you shaping me today? It can be personal in the sense of one-to-one encounters with family members, friends, co-workers. They can be communal outcomes in terms of our family relationships—what are we doing together? Or communal among a group of friends, a small group, your neighborhood. Your circle of influence may expand into social networks, your job or career choice, your volunteer work, service clubs, community organizations. Perhaps outcomes will be systemic, addressing structures of power that are oppressive, or societal ills that are repressive. There's a huge need for the Spirit to move among us to heal racial divides in our country—the need is disruptive and uncomfortable—what opportunities for healing can we step into? Perhaps systemic outcomes will look like solidarity and advocacy with and for the voiceless, those under-represented or ignored, the vulnerable. Outcomes can expand into national arenas—speaking with or taking up the mantle to be a decision maker who promotes the common good and works to sustain societal structures for equity, justice, and well-being. Perhaps the outcomes will be global on behalf of peoples who have not heard what the kingdom of Jesus offers, or for those who are deprived of the basics for life and well-being. What passions or interests is the Spirit kindling in you?

You see, you have a story to tell that describes the wonders of God from your own experiences with God. You have skills and abilities to convey the basis of the beautiful life that is yours in Christ. Pray for openness to the opportunities the Spirit creates around you so that you can add a chapter to God's ongoing story in our world.

All of these are catalyzed by the Spirit's move in and around you. And as you step into these moments again and again, you will be part of outcomes every bit as exceptional as that original moment of Pentecost. Are you ready? Let's do this! AMEN