

“NOW IS THE TIME”

Acts 2:1-42

May 19, 2024

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After listening to Janet’s sermon last week, I wished that I had gotten to preach on Ascension and that she was preaching this week’s story, Pentecost. I like the prayer and waiting periods of church life. I like reflecting and thinking about a text.

I would not be surprised if most of my Pentecost sermons were mostly reflections. But the longer Janet talked, the more I realized that this week’s story had to be more about call, about doing, than about learning and deepening our understanding about faith. F. Scott Spencer puts it this way: “The atmosphere changes: the journey now ‘feels’ different; less like a secret passage through backroads and alleyways, and more like a parade down Main Street” (p. 41).

We commonly talk about Pentecost as the birthday of the church, and it is that; but for the disciples it was the day of birth, not the birthday. The suitcase has been packed for weeks, labor is in full swing, and the adrenaline is flowing. No more waiting, no more contemplating a name. It is time for this fearful, bumbling group of disciples, betrayers, deniers, and cowards, to take center stage, to harvest the crops. It seems to me that I spend a lot of my time in ministry preparing us to do something or celebrating something we’ve done. These things do belong to the life of the church, but Pentecost is the day when it’s too late to add one more thing to the suitcase and too early to celebrate success.

As with the first Pentecost, so with our Pentecost. It comes suddenly and it comes with power. The story recalls the Spirit brooding over the world at creation, the burning bush appearing to Moses, the birth and baptism of Jesus. Janet told us last week that Jesus leaves the disciples so that they can begin to see and feel his presence in other ways. At Pentecost that presence explodes onto the scene. God, again, descends to earth. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Salvation is always about God coming to us. The kingdom of God is at hand, says Jesus, because God is present and can be seen in the person and work of Jesus. At Pentecost, God can be seen and heard in the lives and testimony of the disciples.

They not only tell of the mighty works of God, but they do so in languages that those gathered can understand. Initially confusion reigns with the crowd divided between curiosity and condescension, between attempts to understand and mockery. Is something truly wonderful going on or are the disciples simply drunk?

Peter, Stands on the Rock, explains. This is the fulfillment of Creator is the Great Spirit’s vision. The Spirit of God is being poured out on all peoples. It is an inclusive movement, embracing men and women, slave and free, young and old. The talk is of visions and dreams. God is again entering the world and has a word, a prophetic word, to speak to a lost world.

It is a word first spoken to devout Jews from every nation. Devout Jews who failed to understand Jesus, who rejected his message and treated him as a danger to the faith. But the faith had stopped seeing God in the world. “Repent! Turn around!” says Stands on the Rock.

Some Christians have stopped seeing God in the world. Instead of welcoming the prodigal home, they have embraced the judgment of the elder brother. They have condemned women to live under the tyranny of abusive husbands. They have embraced the politics of power over communities of cooperation. They have abandoned, no, threatened the earth for a place in the heavenly choir. They have shunned the “least of these” in order to gain positions of influence. They have turned the Jesus of the gospels into a warrior God taking vengeance on his “enemies.”

As with the first Pentecost, so with our Pentecost today, we face devout Christians who malign God’s world, condemn those whom God loves, and fail to see the God who is here among us. Too many so-called disciples have embraced the prosperity gospel. Too many have become fixated on the purity of the church and forgotten the call to hospitality.

This is not new. There have always been competing visions about how to make one’s way through the world. Christians have embraced or accommodated themselves to a variety of these visions. One faith community looks at the world as a lost cause and so preaches a message of separation from this world and hope for the next. Another sees the world as corrupt and preaches a message of God’s call to root out evil and replace it with institutions that reign in evil and establish the rule of God over the world. Yet another views the world as a mixture and advocates for a variety of approaches to living, from separation to setting alternative examples to models of transformation. The point is that the relationship between one’s faith and how one lives in the world is far more complicated than we make out.

The specific context for the day of Pentecost is that the synagogue has rejected the way of Jesus as a valid approach for the faithful Jew. Stands on the Rock phrases the issue quite starkly in laying the blame for Jesus’ death primarily on Jews, and yet most of the individual Jews gathered were no more responsible than you or I. And yet they accept the charge. “The words pierced their hearts like a long knife,” we are told. “What must we do?” they ask. “Change your thinking,” says Stands on the Rock. “Repent” in other versions. Turn around is how we talked about it in Lent. Look in the other direction.

It’s no different in our Pentecost. Matthew Skinner writes: “Every day people look at events around them and ask, ‘What does this mean?’ or ‘What am I supposed to do with this?’” (p.13). This is the question that the crowd asks of the extraordinary signs on Pentecost. It is our question. It’s the question addressed by the prophets.

According to Skinner, “Prophets speak truth into the confusion generated on Pentecost. They do the same when economies falter or relationships fall apart” (p. 14). Stands on the Rock speaks a hard truth into the turmoil in Jerusalem. The people have rejected

God's messenger, have sent Creator Sets Free out of their world. But instead of a word of judgment, Stands on the Rock issues an invitation. It's not too late to change your mind, because God does not abandon the world. Jesus, Creator Sets Free, is alive. God "descends" once again into the world. That is the meaning of the wind and the fire and the proclamations of God's mighty deeds. Turn around and see the good thing happening now.

Skinner continues his observations: "Prophets speak also to good situations, such as thriving communities or people given opportunities for a fresh start. Prophets – all those who follow Jesus and share in the Holy Spirit – direct our attention in our current circumstances to see where we might rediscover the availability of God's salvation or God's commitment to renew and restore. They have eyes to see God's presence or to reassert God's priorities when others might be too disoriented or distracted to do so" (p.14).

Christians have since the beginning been distracted by many things, chief among them, maintaining the purity of the faith. As a pastor, preacher, and teacher, I spend time studying and trying to define what it means to follow Jesus. You may have noticed that I have some very strong opinions about that. And I think it's very important that we practice discernment concerning God's particular call to us. We could not do that without the birth of the church, without the support of a faith community.

But if our experience of Pentecost is only about the birthday and not about the birth; if it is only about the remembrance and celebration and not God's continuing presence, we've missed an important point. Our Pentecost needs to be as much about "telling about the great and powerful things done by the Great Spirit" as at that first Pentecost. There is a time and place for prayer, study, and reflection. These are essential components of following Christ. But Pentecost calls us to the present, to recognize and proclaim where God is at work today.

Now is the time to recognize the movement of God's Spirit among the peacemakers, those who mediate conflict, who heal relationships, who promote forgiveness and facilitate restitution.

Now is the time to speak about the God's compassionate presence in ministries of grace, offering comfort to those who grieve, counsel to those who struggle, and hospitality to the excluded.

Now is the time to join hands with those whose love for creation, for the beauty of God's earth leads to restoration, protection, and renewal of the environment.

Now is the time to celebrate new relationships formed in the context of new ministries. Now is the time to proclaim God's inspiration of those engaged in feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the unhoused, offering welcome to the marginalized.

God is doing great and powerful things in our world. The Spirit is moving among us. People are embracing visions and dreaming dreams. For over a decade now, our denomination has been encouraging congregations to become Earth Care Congregations. Many churches have answered that call. They are using less energy, educating their members about healthy, restorative ways of relating to the earth, and finding creative ways of sending their message into the community. The Matthew 25 Initiative is giving congregations a missional focus that many have struggled to find over the years. An organization has formed in Lansing to implement a plan for reparations to their black and brown neighbors. A group of churches in Portage is organizing the first Pride Picnic in the city in two weeks on June second. Ripples Effect is providing a more inclusive social and recreational setting to a more diverse group of people.

Not all of those are associated with a faith community, but God is present in them. It's a troubled and troubling world, but God is there. Now is the time to see what God is doing, to participate in what God is doing, to be part of the renewing and restoring work of God. The suitcase is packed. The waiting is over. Jesus is alive. The Spirit is flowing. The time is now to see God at work in the children of God. Amen.

Resources:

Skinner, Matthew L. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*. Brazos Press: Grand Rapids MI, 2015.

Spencer, F. Scott. *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* Baker Academic: Grand Rapids MI, 2004.