

“What Shall We Do?”

Introduction: Tomorrow, Memorial Day, in parks, cemeteries and city squares all across America, various speakers will deliver Memorial Day addresses of one sort or another to help us honor the memory of those who served and sacrificed on our behalf as a part of this country’s armed forces. The hope of those who will speak, I am sure, is that they provide their listeners with words that are memorable, words that give those who hear them something to think about, and maybe even something to do.

Before we hear any of those speeches there is another I’d like us to hear, one delivered by the apostle Peter on the day called Pentecost. It was a speech aimed at explaining the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit in ways that left worshippers who had come to Jerusalem amazed and perplexed. One could argue that it was even more amazing and perplexing that Peter was standing and testifying about Jesus before a crowd of several thousand, when just a few weeks earlier he was afraid to tell a group of just two or three that he even knew this Jesus! But now, Peter was both ready, and empowered, to talk!

So, let’s hear how Luke describes what happened on that day, and then consider how Peter explains it, connecting the dots of OT promises, to the mission of Jesus, and then ultimately to the lives of his listeners, which includes us. “What does this mean?” and “What shall we do?” are the two very important questions Peter’s Pentecost Day speech seeks to address. [READ]

I. The Day of Pentecost

A. Pentecost, which took place 50 days after Easter, was one of the three major Jewish feast days. It celebrated the harvest, and pilgrims from a variety of places would gather in Jerusalem to acknowledge and thank God for his great provision. Added to this particular Pentecost celebration, for the followers of Jesus, was the fact that ten days earlier, Jesus had returned to the dimension of heaven, ascending to the Father’s right hand. Before he’d left, he’d described for his followers the mission on which he was sending them – to bear witness in word and in deed to him – beginning in their neighborhoods and eventually extending out to the ends of the earth. But before heading out on this mission, Jesus had instructed his followers to wait for the gift of the Spirit. Without the guiding and empowering of the Spirit, this mission would go nowhere; their nets would be empty, as Jesus had illustrated for them just a few weeks earlier. And so they waited, gathering together, as we saw, constantly in prayer (Acts 1:4-14).

We might think of that time of prayer as the way these followers made space for the Spirit’s arrival. Or, we could think of it as sailors raising the sails on their boat so that when the wind began to blow, the sails would fill and the boat would move out.

B. Either way, as Luke describes it, the breath of God, as the Spirit is sometimes called, really began to blow! What was that like? Even Luke, an educated physician, seems to struggle to describe it. The coming of the Spirit, he explains, was like the sound of a violent wind. It was like little flames on fire resting on each person’s head. And it was as if somehow each person there spoke a language not their own, but one which those of different nationalities could understand. Amazing! Perplexing! What does this mean? the people wondered. At the very least, wind symbolizes God’s life-creating power. Fire is a mark of his purifying presence. And languages reveal that God’s kingdom was to be a multi-cultural community. What on earth was God doing?

## II. “What does this mean?”

A. As they wrestled to understand what on earth was taking place, some sluffed it off, making fun of the followers of Jesus, assuming they must be drunk. But Peter said no, it's only nine in the morning! Tho, as one commentator notes, if you were to be in New York City on St. Patrick's Day, 9:00 a.m. is definitely not too early to see the effects of Irish whiskey on at least some in the crowd! But not here. These people were not drunk on wine but filled with the Spirit (cf. Eph. 5:18). And so Peter begins to connect the dots, beginning with the promise of God, as brought by the OT prophet, Joel. Quoting a long-ish passage from memory, that Peter must've been pondering for a while, Joel had foreseen a day in which the Spirit of God would not only come on particular people, at particular times, for particular purposes, but would be poured out on daughters as well as sons, on the young as well as the old, and on servants as well as leaders. They would all start to have dreams and see visions of a new and better day. And God would come to bring about his just judgment on both the wicked and the righteous.

B. Although the timing of these cataclysmic events was not certain, this day has begun, Peter wants the crowd to know. The deluge of the Spirit affirms that we're in the last days, explains Peter. Last days is a time marker used by the NT writers to indicate the period between the first and second coming of Jesus. It's called "last" because it is the final period of redemptive history, the time of the Spirit, the time when God's plan to heal and restore a broken world would be brought to completion. So, to these promises, Peter connects the "dot" that is Jesus, the one whose coming inaugurates the last days and who brings about the new life that God offers. Peter speaks of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit that are a part of the mission of Jesus in these days (vv. 22-33). In Jesus, God's vision for humanity is being fulfilled. These are the days in which we are living, days in which the church is being directed and empowered by the Spirit to carry out the ongoing ministry of Jesus.

## III. “What shall we do?”

A. So if that's what's going on, how are we to respond? Many, we heard, were "cut to the heart." Likely convicted by the Spirit, they had come to realize that Jesus had come and died for them and that in some fashion, they were responsible for his death. "What shall we do?" they asked Peter. How shall we respond to this marvelous embrace of God's love? Peter calls for a three-fold response.

1. Repent. Or, as we sometimes describe it, "turn around." As a writer named Robert Webber puts it, God's vision for us is a reversal of our present identity. We're called to turn away from our identity in Adam and turn toward our identity in Jesus. Jesus is not only our Savior; he is also the image of perfect humanity. He models what we were originally created to be, he shapes the nature of our being. As Paul writes to the church, in Jesus we are becoming a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). In Jesus, we are being renewed in the image of our Creator (Col. 3:10). Repentance, therefore, is not a one time, get it over with act; it is a daily, continuous turning away from that which robs us of life and toward that which gives us life.

2. Be baptized. The turning of our identity from Adam to Jesus is to be expressed in a ritual that marks us out as God's own. It's a ritual that immerses us in the death, and the resurrection of Jesus through which our old life becomes submerged, and our new life begins to emerge. Like repentance, baptism is also not just a one-time event but a way of life. It becomes an identity we live into. Like fish who cannot live apart from water, we are to swim in the water of our baptism, for the water represents the creative action of God's hand.

An ancient baptismal prayer puts it:

We thank you Almighty God, for the gift of water: Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. (BCP, 306)

Baptism is not a means of salvation but a sign of God's work on our behalf.

3. Join together. Peter doesn't say this directly, but it seemed like the most natural thing to do if they wanted to take the call to grow into Christ and participate in his mission seriously. And so we read: They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

B. I was struck as I reflected on this text this past week how varied the ways of the Spirit are. We see him act in dramatic ways in that upper room through something *like* wind and fire. We see him act in equipping ways through the gifts of language and insight and courage given to his followers. We see him act in convicting ways as many who listened to Peter became conscious of their sin. We see him act in deepening ways as those in whom he took up residence were moved to gather regularly in worship and study and prayer. And if we were to read on in Acts, we would see him act in inviting, hospitable ways as the people around the church saw a community living a life they wanted to be a part of.

What's clear is that God desires his vision for the world to be worked out through the church, and that the church gets its orders and its power to implement this vision from the Spirit, who Pentecost reveals Jesus has poured out. May we raise our sails that we might be ready to move when and where he directs.