

# Ready for Action

## Acts 2:1-21

CWZepp, BWCOB, May 2007

Six-year-old Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel were sitting together in the back row of the church. Joel giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally, his big sister had enough. "You're not supposed to make noise in church."

"Why not?" Joel asked.

Angie pointed over her shoulder and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're called the hushers."

A boy and his grandfather are walking through a church looking at photographs along the wall. The grandfather tells the boy that these are men who died while in the service. The boy frowns and asks "Did they die in the early service or the late service?"

One night a woman was praying with her children before bed. She explained that Jesus would love to live inside their hearts, and they enthusiastically agreed to ask Him "in". So she left the room, and a few minutes later she came back to find them rubbing their chests. When she asked them what they were doing they replied..."We don't feel Him in there, mom. We don't think He's moved in yet!"

All joking aside, for many of us, gathering together for worship is a little like that. Each Sunday we say the words and invite the presence of God to be with us in our worship. But after all is said and done, many of us leave worship silently wondering whether God was here at all. We were here – we said the words, we sang the songs, we prayed the prayers – but we didn't *feel* anything. We don't feel God in here (*chest*) and so we wonder if God was really here.

This was surely not a problem with which the followers of Jesus struggled on that day so long ago when they gathered together to celebrate the festival of Pentecost just 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus. If we take the scripture literally, we can imagine a gathering of 120 or so followers of Jesus – all those who had accompanied Jesus from his baptism to his ascension, including the twelve minus Judas Iscariot – all gathered together in one place. When suddenly a sound like the rush of a violent wind filled the whole house where they were gathered. Tongues of fire seemed to appear out of thin air and come to rest upon each of the believers. And these simple folks from Galilee began to speak about the works of God in a variety of foreign languages, causing such a stir that a crowd began to gather around them, and to the amazement of all, people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire for the Feast of Pentecost heard them speaking each in their native language. Surely, a gathering of believers could not have walked away from a time like that untouched, wondering if they had indeed been graced by the divine presence.

But there plenty of reasons not to take this story from Acts literally. First of all, although this text clearly implies that the disciples began to speak in foreign languages at the original Christian Pentecost, many interpreters have come to the conclusion that any unusual speaking that occurred was in fact glossolalia, the spontaneous outpouring of unintelligible sounds under

a state of religious ecstasy – what we usually refer to as “speaking in tongues.” This inference is supported by the fact that nowhere else in the New Testament or in Acts itself did the apostles or anyone else ever make use of such an ability to speak foreign languages. Nor would such a gift have been particularly useful in a place and time in which the Greek language was almost universally understood. Moreover, to conclude that the believers at that first Christian Pentecost might have been overcome with religious emotion and experienced glossolalia would make more sense of the jibes by the crowd that the believers were filled with new wine, for I doubt that anyone would have accused a band of Galileans who could suddenly speak in fluent foreign tongues of being drunk.

A further reason to suspect that this story is not meant to be taken literally is to be found in the list of peoples who made up the Pentecost crowd that gathered around the believers and – according to the text – heard them speaking in their native tongues. Tom Long has pointed out that not only is the gathering around the believers an ethnically diverse one, but it is also a historically impossible one. The Medes had not been around for at least two centuries by that point in time, and the Elamites were mentioned in Ezra 2, but not again. The effect, says Long, is something like saying, “You should have been with us there on Pentecost. We had a huge number of visitors for the service. Some were all the way from Montana. There were people from Arizona, Michigan, not to mention a whole van load of Assyrians, a couple of Babylonians, and a nice little Hittite couple who asked to be baptized.”

For these reasons among others, I am not inclined to believe that what we find in Acts is a literal, historical account of the happenings among the believers at the first Festival of Pentecost after the crucifixion of Jesus. But neither am I willing to simply dismiss this part of our sacred tradition because I find it to be based on dubious historical facts. Indeed, I do not believe that the story was meant to be taken literally, but rather to convey a deep truth that arose out of the experience of that early Christian community in their first Pentecost gathering.

And so I find myself lingering long with those in the crowd that gathered around those early believers, asking myself “What does this mean?” What did that first Christian Pentecost mean for those believers who experienced it? And what did it mean for the author, who felt compelled to share the story? But most importantly, what does it mean for us today, for those of us who are heirs to this tradition – those of us who claim Pentecost as our own, and yet know it only through this account in the book of Acts, an account that is not even from an eye-witness.

One possibility is for us to conclude that what happened on that Pentecost day so long ago was a one-time event – a unique gift of God for the edification and empowerment of the newborn church. Whether it was glossolalia or actual foreign languages, and whether the author of Acts got his facts messed up in listing off the nations present, these are of little consequence for us today. What matters is that something happened to those followers of Christ who gathered together on the festival of Pentecost shortly after their Lord was crucified – something that can only be called the Holy Spirit. They were not the same after that experience, and it led them to spread the good news with a power that they had not before known. On that day the church was born, and the Jesus movement began to spread across the known world. If we go this route, then Pentecost for us is the birthday of the church – a day of remembrance and celebration for the miraculous beginning of the church to which we now are joined.

Another possibility is to be found among those Christians who ascribe to a Pentecostal or charismatic theology. I use those terms fairly loosely to refer to those followers of Christ who believe that the Holy Spirit continues to manifest itself in believers through the baptism of the Holy Spirit as evidenced in such experiences of religious ecstasy as speaking in tongues. For these believers, Pentecost is not just an event to be commemorated, but a continual reality to be experienced every time the community gathers for worship.

Now, I must confess that I am fairly ignorant of Pentecostal worship myself, and somewhat skeptical about what I have heard of it. But I have friends who worship and follow Christ in this manner, and I know they are good and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. And after spending a fair portion of my life sitting in often stuffy, lifeless, and wholly spirit-less mainline Protestant worship services, sometimes leading them myself, I must also admit that there is a part of me that wonders if maybe, just maybe, I am missing something from my experience of worship in the Christian faith. I have been challenged by my charismatic friends who say that although I would claim to worship the Lord in Spirit and in Truth, in reality I worship only in Truth.

Is this what so many of us feel is so often missing from our experience of worship? Might it be that our concern for reverence and our love of structure and order could be a barrier to the movement of God's Spirit among us? Might it be that what we feel so often to be missing is in fact God's Spirit, waiting to break upon us like a consuming fire if only we opened ourselves to its baptism and to the coming of Pentecost in our own lives?

I do not want to say yes, but I also hesitate to say no. Because I believe that there is something missing from worship in many, if not most, of our churches. But I am not convinced that it has anything to do with whether we seek the still small voice of God in quiet reverence or yield to the ecstatic frenzy of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Nor do I believe that it matters whether we come together around the sounds of gospel choir, a pipe organ, a rock band, or a native drum; or whether we sit in pews or chairs or around a campfire; whether we wear cutoff and Birkenstocks or suits and wingtips; or whether we choose to use hymnals and bulletins or projectors and PowerPoint.

A final possibility for answering the question of what Pentecost might mean for us today, and what I think may so often be missing from our experience of worship in our day, is the expectation that God's Spirit will truly move among us as we are gathered together, and that when it does, we will be forever changed.

You see, when the believers were gathered together at that festival of Pentecost only seven weeks after Jesus had been crucified, they did so with great expectation. Only days before, as we read in Acts chapter 1, the living Christ had ascended into heaven and left them with a promise – a promise that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And so they devoted themselves to prayer, and they gathered together in expectation that the promise Jesus made to them would be fulfilled. Whatever actually happened in that gathering of believers at Pentecost, one thing is for sure – they were empowered and they were changed by it.

I have come to believe that the reason these believers were ultimately changed on that Pentecost day is not because the Spirit was given to them for the first time, nor because they experienced some sort of religious ecstasy that evidenced itself in the speaking of tongues, though they may indeed have shared that experience together. Rather, I think that the root of

their change – the source of their empowerment – was that they had gathered together **expecting** that the Spirit of Christ would move among them and give them the power, the courage, and the motivation to go into all the world as his witnesses.

That sense of anticipation, that hope, that expectation of Holy presence – honest to goodness God moving among us presence – that, I believe, is what we are often missing in our worship. And that is why Pentecost must yet be awakened anew in our life and worship together as a community of faith. Too often we come to this place out of a sense of duty, a sense of religious obligation to fulfill all righteousness. Too often we as leaders stand before you to preach a word that we honestly expect (and sometimes hope) that you will forget as soon as you move beyond these walls. Too often we gather together hoping only to stay awake for the hour, yearning only for something in the service to grab our attention long enough to distract us from the rumbling of our stomachs reminding us that we still have not yet decided where to go for lunch after worship.

If our churches are dying, as so many in our culture suggest, then it is because we no longer believe that God's spirit truly moves among us, because we no longer expect that our gathering together in faith will meet with the empowering Spirit of the living God and move us to be more than we are now. Will Willimon said it well when he wrote, "I worry about a church that gets too comfortable with life as it is, that loses the expectation that God may work real transformation among us."

I believe that God wants to do something new among us today. I believe that God longs to give new power and new energy to the church to continue the work and witness of Jesus in our world. But I am not sure we are ready. I am not sure we are ready for the Spirit – the same Spirit that moved among those first believers at Pentecost – to move afresh among us and give us new birth, new mission, new passion, and new hope. I am not sure that we are ready to see visions and dream dreams and to move into action with the power of the Spirit which God yearns to pour out upon us. I am just not sure we are ready.

But I hope that I am wrong.

## **Benediction**

The words of Cardinal Walter Kasper:

*Everywhere that life breaks forth and comes into being,  
Everywhere that new life as it were seethes and bubbles,  
And even, in the form of hope,  
          everywhere that life is violently devastated, throttled, gagged, and slain –  
Wherever true life exists,  
          there the Spirit of God is at work.*

May we go in the full expectation that such Spirit work will be done in, through, and among us.  
Amen.