

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 24, 2017

## [Acts 2:1-21](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

(Note: Acts 2:1-21 is NOT one of the given texts for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. It is one of the two chosen texts of our guest preacher at BWCOB this week – Jeff Carter, President of Bethany Theological Seminary. So don't worry or get confused if some of the links below take you to materials for another calendar date – that is simply an aberration for this week! )

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary** (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Happy Birthday to You, Church” – May 15, 2016)

The descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost has traditionally been understood as the birth of the Christian church. Thus, the emphasis on the idea of "Happy Birthday" in the material above. It marked a turning point in the history of the revelation of Jesus as the Christ -- as the Anointed One promised in the scriptures of the Jews -- and the incipient movement of that revelation into the first-century non-Jewish eastern Mediterranean world.

The event, as recorded by the author of Luke-Acts, occurred on "the day of Pentecost" (v. 1), one of the three, annual agricultural festivals in the Jewish liturgical year (the others being the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the Festival of Ingathering). Pentecost, meaning "fifty," fell 50 days after Passover, and was also known as the Festival of Weeks, since its legislation prescribes the counting of seven weeks (or Sabbaths) after Passover for its date (cf. Leviticus 23:15-21; Exodus 23:14-17; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:9-12).

Pentecost was not a particularly conspicuous date on which to base the events in today's passage, but it provided the first hearers of the passage a convenient and immediate chronological point of reference. Pentecost was a harvest festival of the early summer, in which the first fruits were gathered and offered in part to God. The symbolism of the first fruits of the field and the first fruits of the Christian revelation, while possible,

ought not be pressed as a certainty.

The disciples were "all together in one place" (v. 1), repeating an emphasis found in Acts on the unity of the early church (see, e.g., 2:44; 4:23-24; 5:12). The text does not indicate whether the company of the disciples was limited to the Twelve or included the 120 mentioned in 1:15; the overall context of the beginning of the out-breaking of the Christian message to the Gentile world would favor the latter supposition.

A sound "like the rush of a violent wind" and "divided tongues, as of fire" (vv. 2-3) were the physical manifestations of the Spirit's presence. Wind and fire (and, frequently, earthquake) were the regular physical accompaniments to the appearance of the deity of the Hebrews -- a theophany. The classic descriptions of theophanies in the OT are in Exodus 19:16-19 -- the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai -- and 1 Kings 19:11-15, the appearance of God to Elijah on Mount Horeb. An echo in the NT of these classic theophanies is the account of Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9 and parallels; see also Exodus 24:9-18; Isaiah 6:1-8; 66:15-16).

The text does not indicate either actual wind or actual fire, but only "a sound" like wind and "divided tongues" as of fire. The language is explicitly metaphoric, and the emphasis of the description is on the supernatural, not the natural.

With this announcement of its presence, the Holy Spirit filled everyone in the house who began to speak in other languages, "as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4).

Being filled with (or overshadowed by) the Holy Spirit is the common biblical description of spirit possession, either individual or group, positive or negative (e.g., Numbers 11:25; 1 Samuel 11:6; 18:10; 19:9, 23; 1 Chronicles 12:18; Luke 1:35, 41, 67; 2:25; 3:22; 4:1; Acts 10:44; 19:6). The precise meaning of the expression varied considerably over the long history of its use in the biblical text, as did the degree of its theological content. Although ecstatic utterance often accompanied spirit possession, it was not necessary, and the result of the Spirit's presence could take any number of forms.

The speaking reported in today's lesson was unusual, because those speaking in various known languages were all believed by their hearers to be "Galileans" (v. 7), i.e., from a culturally isolated region of northern Israel. Presumably, the speakers' accents, heard previously, indicated their origin, as there is no indication of peculiar dress or other appearance.

The ability to speak in known languages other than one's own but understood perfectly well by others, which is the case in the story of Pentecost, is to be distinguished carefully from the ecstatic speech -- speaking in tongues -- described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:1-25, as Paul himself makes clear: "For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them ..." (v. 2).

The scene in Acts is precisely the opposite: "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" (v. 8). The gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the birth of the Christian church, is not an explosion of esoteric glossolalia, but a torrent of comprehension. Devout Jews from the diaspora -- "from every nation under heaven" (v. 5) -- were able to understand the message about "God's deeds of power" (v. 11) through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Although the content of those deeds is not further specified in the passage at hand, it almost certainly included the recitation of the mighty deeds of God -- the *magnalia Dei* -- that formed the Jewish narrative of salvation, from the creation of the earth in Genesis, through the liberation of the Exodus, the revelation of the law on Mount Sinai, the survival of the wilderness experience, the arrival of the people in the promised land, etc.

To these antecedents from the OT would naturally have been added, in the Acts context, the oral tradition about Jesus -- certainly the traditions about his adult life and teachings, his crucifixion and resurrection, and possibly birth narratives, as well. The crucifixion and resurrection, with whatever subsequent post-resurrection appearances may have been known to the gathered disciples, would have formed the core of "God's deeds of power," specifically, concerning Jesus.

But, it is important to remember that the whole point of the passage in Acts is to link the extraordinary event in the nascent Christian community with the long history of salvation of the Jews, of which that nascent community was, until the time of the writing in Acts, comprised. Peter's quotation from the prophet Joel (vv. 17-21, quoting with small but significant variations the Septuagint version of Joel 2:28-32) is intended to show how the events currently unfolding were, in fact, predicted in the Jewish Scriptures.

The story of Jesus would have made little sense to or impact on its first hearers -- Jews -- had his identity not been understood within the context of the *Heilsgeschichte* -- the salvation history -- of the Jewish people. Jesus' identity as the Messiah made sense only in a Jewish context; pagans were not waiting for a messiah. This is the reason the Jewish-Christian message was directed, initially, exclusively to Jews: "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'" (Matthew 15:24).

This theme, which runs throughout the gospels, reinforces the conclusion that Jesus understood himself and was understood by his contemporaries to be a Jewish reformer, not a Christian founder. There is very little evidence in the traditions about Jesus himself that he intended to found a new religion.

Historical circumstances in the immediate aftermath of his crucifixion and resurrection, however, made a decisive break between Pharisaic Judaism and the followers of Jesus almost inevitable, and one of those circumstances is reported in today's passage. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, in such a way that Jews from all over the known world, as distinct from simply the land of Israel, could hear the message about Jesus' relation to their story of salvation, was an important step toward the opening of that message to the Gentile world and the full acceptance of Gentiles into the new community centered around Jesus the Jew.

## Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Romans passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!

- Check out especially the sermon from Eric Baretto from June 4 of this year – [“Can’t We All Just Get Along?”](#)
- Another good [commentary on Acts 2:1-21](#) from Jacob Myers

## Reflection Questions

1. Pentecost was a pre-existing festival celebration in the Jewish calendar. How did that context influence and/or shape the events narrated in this scripture?
2. Did you grow up with any particular Pentecost traditions in your church or family? If so, how do these traditions influence the way you read, hear, and/or understand this story today?
3. The scripture makes it clear through the language used to describe the movement of the Holy Spirit coming upon the gathering of the disciples that what happened could only be described in metaphors and simile. Is this important? How does Peter “connect the dots” for those who witnessed this mysterious and powerful event?
4. In verses 17-21, Peter quotes from Joel 2:28-32. A close study reveals a few minor, but seemingly significant changes in that quotation? What is significant about this quotation? And what is significant about the changes?
5. The above quote clearly names that such will occur in “the last days.” How do we make sense of that assertion reading this account nearly 2000 years later? Another metaphor? A mistaken application or assumed context by Peter (and others)? An example of the “Already/Not yet” kingdom age ushered in by Jesus?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?**