

The Work of Prophecy

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Pentecost: Year C: John 14 and Acts 2
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Acts 2:1-21¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ ”

John 14:8-17 Philip said to [Jesus,] “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you

another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

In Acts at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon all peoples. This allows everyone to do the work of prophecy. That is, truth telling and interpreting times theologically. Do not be timid, you are a prophet!

Before we move to the Acts text, I want to say two things about the assigned John text for today. I don't think it is fair to read a text that is problematic and then not preach on it. But today is Pentecost and I'm certain there would be some crime punishable by the Church if I didn't preach on Acts. Therefore, two points about John's Gospel.

1. Jesus makes a perfect point. If we want to know about God – at one level, we need look no farther than Jesus, Himself. Jesus is God incarnate. Embodied. Jesus says, 'Whoever has seen Him, has seen God the Father.' We would change that to say, 'Whoever has read or learned about Jesus, has come to know God the Father.'
2. There is a sticky verse. Jesus says, 'If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.' Far be it from me to challenge Jesus. Yet, countless parents have asked God, in Jesus' name to heal their children from childhood cancer. Countless people have prayed in Jesus' name to end war or hunger or any other trial and tribulation. Just because we ask and don't seem to get an answer, doesn't mean that God hasn't heard. Or that God doesn't care, or understand, or is not working behind the scenes to work God's will in relation to our sick child, or war-torn country. Often the answer is yes, no, or not yet. You and I struggle with the no and not yet answers. Remember that God always holds the larger picture and we do not. Doesn't mean we cannot ask!

God's Holy Spirit is in the house! Yes, indeed! God's Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity is in our presence. Just like it was that holy day which was like a scene out of a movie. The wind! The speaking in other languages! The fire!

We celebrate a couple of major church holidays. Christmas. Easter. And Bugs Bunny's Birthday. For the Jews: they had three. Passover, The Feast of Weeks (also called Shavuot, Wheat festival or Pentecost), and The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) in the fall. Shavuot just began on the evening of June 1 and celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Jews, both residents and pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Festival were all gathered together. It must have been astonishing to see the tongues of fire on one another. Exhilarating for all those gathered to begin speaking in other languages that they had never learned. Likewise, to understand what others were saying!

Have you ever had a profound experience which either happened very quickly, or you were overcome with emotion while it took place? Your wedding day. The birth of a child. Receiving a major award or promotion. Afterwards, your mind needs to process it. That can take a little while.

Peter helps the gathered crowd to process what has happened. “These are not drunk as you suppose...” In doing so, he is lifting up another gift of Pentecost, the gift of prophecy. Peter restates a portion of text from the prophet Joel, with a few tiny edits.

The Spirit will be poured out on all flesh: men and women, children too. Keep in mind that in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, God’s Spirit was present. It came upon individuals for their particular leadership at certain times. This was very different. Again, Peter recites. ‘Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’ When Joel says slaves, it doesn’t mean household foot washer. It means any of God’s servants.

Then, did you hear it? “And they shall prophesy.” We are God’s servants, you and me. We follow God. We are prophets. Before you squirm in your seats...hold on.

The word ‘prophecy’ carries some bad baggage. We might remember the men all dressed in white standing on chairs in the middle of Stapleton airport. Or on street corners with poster boards: repent or die. There are prophecy conferences where some pretty poor theology runs amuck.

Joke – about barber – returned with his razor knife for shaving and a Bible. Are you prepared to die?

Now prophets in the Old Testament were God’s instruments of truth. They were truth tellers. Some people heard their words and repented. Others blew them off. But they told the truth.

Luther believed in telling the truth. He said, “lets call a thing a thing.”

Secondly, prophecy interprets present experiences with theological meaning. That's what Peter did on Pentecost. He took the experience of the wind and fire which they had all just experienced and interpreted it through a God lens.

If any of you have parenting experience or teaching – lots of commonalities – you already know how to be truth – tellers and interpreters. Don't run in the street after your ball without looking for cars. You could get hurt! It's the truth and an interpretation. In Bible language, it might be called a prophecy.

Pastor Paul Judson rang a large bell outside campus ministry after a mass tragedy in which 22 people died. He had a sign for that tragedy so people driving by would understand why. That was a prophetic act.

Our ELCA has long prided itself on theological truth-telling and interpretation. It's why we write Social Statements and Social messages on topics that society is wrestling with. They include dreams for a changed world. They include the best theologians' opinions we have – even if those opinions differ one with another.

My point is this. God's Spirit has now been turned out upon all people. Not just experts in the church or seminaries. Peter didn't take the pulpit and make everyone else just stand on the sidelines. He was telling them, they were now, too, prophets. Interpreters of God things. Using prayer and remembering what Jesus did when He was alive, so began the early church. They proclaimed His name as they healed, taught and baptized new believers.

God needs your voice and mine. We can be truth – tellers in this world. We can stand up for God's people. We can interpret the actions of large companies who oppress people. We can speak for justice – God's justice for those who have no voice. If thinking of yourself as a prophet scares you – don't. Simply think of yourself as a truth teller and interpreter of God's actions in the world. It's Pentecost people. That Holy Spirit – she's fabulous! She will tell us what to say. Amen.