

Acts 2:1-21 & Philippians 4:4-7
Modern Prophecies
Pentecost
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(Read the Scripture)

“I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” If Peter is right that the Prophet Joel was right, then I hate to tell the Worship Music and the Arts Committee, but we’re going to need a bigger bowl. For on this Pentecost Sunday, I want to celebrate that we Presbyterians commemorate this Pentecost day every time we come to the font, as today, when we marked these three and rehearsed that each of us is included in the covenant of grace, incorporated into the life of Christ and anointed with the gifts of the Spirit.

I will admit it. I suffer a little bit from font envy. My graduating class at Columbia Seminary bought a new font for the seminary chapel — one of those big contact lens fonts that it takes four people to move. Ours is beautiful but, well, it’s less than half the size of the font from my former congregation, which had 10 percent of the membership we do.

Still, this one is way bigger than the font I used to see at St. Philip Presbyterian in Houston. Their former font, in a 600-member church, was a silver bowl placed on the communion table whenever it was needed that looked like it should be holding grapes or apples, not the waters of new life. They’ve gone uptown since then with a beautiful one of glass and bronze.

But even St. Philip’s old font would have been big enough for pouring out the spirit back in the old days, the days before the baptisms of those in this room and of those watching were splashed across the last 11 decades, the days before Pentecost, the days before Jesus.

In the days of Hebrew scripture, in Joel’s day, God didn’t need a big bowl when pouring out the Spirit. Scripture tells us it was more like sprinkling, usually one person at time — here a splash, there a splash. Joseph got some of the Spirit and the Pharaoh could actually see it on him. Moses got some; Samuel got some; Samson got some; even Othneil, son of Kenaz, whoever the heck he was, got some in the book of Judges, chapter 3.

Back then the Spirit seemed a bit stingy; sometimes someone got a lot, sometimes a little. And the outpouring of the Spirit was revocable, like with Saul, and it was sometimes intentionally brief. Over in Exodus, when the people are grumbling about being hungry, God, in an admitted power play, decides that the 70 elders with Moses in the wilderness will get a bit of the Spirit that had been poured out on Moses, but for one night only. And they prophesied like mad, and when it was over, never again.

Two of those 70 elders were supposed to be in the Tent with everyone else. But they were apparently out partying with the people when the Spirit was poured out, and when they started prophesying, it freaked everybody out. When someone, maybe the neighbors, complained, Moses said, according to Numbers 11:29: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them.”

So here we are in today’s text, after Jesus — the prophet, priest and king of the new world order has ascended — and God’s piecemeal sprinkling method of pouring out the Spirit just isn’t going to cut it anymore. God in Christ will hold onto the priestly and kingly roles, but the world is wide, and more prophets are needed. The old way doesn’t seem to work anymore, so God trades in the aspergillum (that’s that sprinkly thing our Roman and Episcopalian friends use) for a hose.

Because if Peter is right, Pentecost is the beginning of the time Joel promised, the beginning of the time Moses hoped for. It’s what Jesus promised in Acts 1 when he told them, told us: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” The Spirit is being poured out on whole crowds of people and not in “one night only” doses. It will in Acts alone be poured out not just on the disciples at Pentecost, but Stephen and six more disciples in Acts 6 and many of the people of Samaria in chapter 8. It visits the Eunuch and Saul, who becomes Paul, and the Gentiles of Cornelius’ entire household, and all the people of Antioch in ever widening waves until the Spirit is being poured out more than beer at a Cubs game.

So, if the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, it means us — me and all of you. We have been made the prophets of God. And therefore, with props to our brother Joel, it means just maybe we have the gift to prophesy like the elders in the Tabernacle. And this week, perhaps I’ve been anointed to tell you something.

Like Joel’s beloved post-exilic Judeans, we live in a time when a plague has stricken the land. It’s not locusts destroying the crops for us though, like it was for the people in his day. In this day, the locusts that have devoured the harvest. The peace of mind and mind for peace of the people are a viral plague of violence, ignorance, fear, anger, hatred and want.

Like many plagues, for this one it is hard to pinpoint a single source. What is inspiring hate this week? The way we try to make the world in to us-es or them-s? Or one of our many isms?

Racism

Sexism

Ableism

Americanism

Classism
White Privilege
Liberalism
Conservatism
Exceptionalism
Partisanism
Randian Individualism

That's the thing about this plague, it's sources are so diverse and so conflicting that we'll never get anywhere if we spend all our time fighting over what caused it.

The prophet Joel doesn't really care where they came from, the locusts that destroyed the food of his people. Oh, yes, he tells them they can view it as the earthly consequences of not following a divine path, perhaps even use language to say God is doing this to them. But that makes us squeamish. However, in the same breath when he considers **that**, Joel says, and Peter remembers, that God is going to do a new thing. And Peter declares that God has done a new thing. And we declare that God is doing a new thing. And the Spirit is washing down over us all, even me. And so, I say:

"In the last days it will be, God declares, that having poured out my Spirit upon all flesh, while old men may dream dreams and write plays or tweet with bad grammar and get lost in their misogyny, many of my sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

You will hear some of that modern prophecy in a just a few minutes. There isn't much I can add to the wisdom they will share, but I'll keep trying.

I was thinking about all of us as I sat at a St. Arbucks a little south of here in Andersonville. It's one of my favorite places to watch the world go by and write sermons. But this day, it seemed like there was a lot of Hebrew scripture-style prophesying going on. A woman in the corner was having a conversation with someone who is not there, not too uncommon in a Chicago Starbucks. But on closer look she was connected by Bluetooth to someone on the other end of a call and they appeared to be collaborating online on something.

Around the corner in the alcove, my favored spot, a group of young folks were talking animatedly in Arabic. They were laughing, sharing jokes or other events of the week it seemed, one in a hijab, the others not.

Sitting next to me was a gentleman who was a little worse for wear, also not uncommon in my experience at that St. Arbucks. He needed assistance opening his energy pack, something the manager of that store gives to homeless folks either free or for a buck — fruit, a cookie, a boiled egg and cheese. He couldn't open it. So, he asked me to. I handed it back and said something benign and pastoral that I can't even remember. He ate only the egg and then began a series of free associations, sharing his own visions.

One man across the room was told he looked like "that guy from Streets of San Francisco," and a few minutes later he erupted with "Karl Malden!" as though that spark of memory was a direct oracle from God. Then he told another man he was Santa Claus (he did bear a remarkable resemblance) who responded, I kid you not, "Shhhh, I'm on

vacation.” He then started just saying the names of various political leaders and then sharing his views about each of them to no one in particular and, I suppose, to everyone. Perhaps that was too much for him and he fell into a sonorous sleep that I hope gave him rest.

Joyful collaboration, hospitality and celebration, grace and humor, truth telling. Friends, they prophesy all around us. There was a bit of modern prophesy in, of all things, a royal wedding yesterday as the Rev. Michael Curry reminded us all of the power of love. But he knew that his sermon alone wasn't going to make Harry love Meghan more or vice versa, or anyone else. He was creating space for the Spirit to do that.

And here's what I hope we can remember: the truths we declare and the truths we confront, the life of discipleship that we all undertake starting at the font and continuing through confirmation and beyond into adult life, is not done in a world where God has been stingy with the sharing of the Spirit. And as daunting as the tasks are before us, we live among communities and systems and, yes, even other traditions, that are drenched in the Spirit. So, look around and see Her at work.

And remember, on this day of Pentecost, for those folks in Jerusalem that day, no one remembered who spoke in the language this person or that person needed to hear. The miracle was not in the speaking but in being heard and understood. And the disciples didn't do that, the Spirit did.

And so as much as we fret, as we should, about what we need to do, what we need to say, how we need to use our voices and strength to follow Jesus and help bring about God's kingdom of grace and peace, none of us, not the holiest among us, not even the professional Christians like Jessica and me — none of us is winning people over to the way of Jesus; none of us is the one transforming those who see what we do, or hear what we say. Thanks be to God, that is God's job.

You may have noticed I haven't touched the Philippians text. That's because it's Paul's blessing to beloved colleagues and friends. So, I let it be ours today as well. Hear it again:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.