



Mt Vernon United Church of Christ

1693 Washington St.

Verona, WI 53593

608-832-6677

Welcome Done Right

Here is the full text for this week's Pentecost celebration.

Acts 2. 1-21

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All 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. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, 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."

Pentecost (in Hebrew called Shavout) is a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest. It occurs every year 50 days after the second night of Passover. This year it began on Saturday evening, May 19, and ends Monday evening, May 21. Sometime in the 1st or 2nd century AD, (or thereabouts) the holiday began to be associated with the giving of the Torah, the law of Moses, on Mt Sinai—which traditionally occurred 50 days after the exodus from Egypt.

In Bible times, Shavout was one of the three Jewish pilgrimage holidays—festivals when Jews from around the empire were encouraged to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the faithfulness of God and to reinforce the bonds of their scattered community. This is why it is not a surprise, as the Acts 2 story has it, that there were large crowds in Jerusalem representing nations from near and far.

1. This question will encourage you to look at this story from a different angle, if not in a whole new light—always a good exercise for understanding the Bible: Describe what happens in this story without using the phrase, “the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples”, or any similar religious language. What happens to the people in the room? What happens to the people on the street?
2. If you read this story carefully, you will probably notice several details that seem implausible. That is not to say they didn’t happen, only that they feel unusual, at best, if not unlikely. Make a list of those details that seem to stretch your imagination.
3. In Hebrew and in Greek there is one word that is translated, depending on the context, as wind, breath or spirit (“ruach” in Hebrew; “pneuma” in Greek). Can you think of any other places in the Bible where wind, breath or spirit are important elements of a story? Can you find any parallels in those stories (particularly in what God is doing in the story) to what is happening in this Pentecost story? (Hint: see Genesis 1:2; 2:7; 8:1; Exodus 14:21,22; 1 Kings 19:11-18; Matthew 3:16; John 3:8; 20:22 among others)
4. When and where have you witnessed a “violent wind”? How did it make you feel? What makes this “violent wind (spirit/breath)” holy?
5. In vs 8-11 Luke lists 16 ethnic groups or geographic regions, representing the entirety of the empire. The young church, much to their surprise, discovers they have a message for the whole world. Two of these groups, the Medes and the Elamites, had been essentially extinct for several hundred years—that is to say, there were no Medes or Elamites living at this time. Including them was not accidental on Luke’s part. What is the significance of telling people who no longer exist about the “mighty works of God”? If the gospel is addressed to those no longer on the scene (Medes and Elamites) and to those currently on the scene (everybody alive at the time), to whom else might it be addressed?
6. Which “mighty works of God” do you think the disciples were speaking of?
7. Peter seems to suggest (v. 16) that it is easier to believe the prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled than to believe people can be drunk at 9 o’clock in the morning. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? (This is not a silly question).
8. Vs. 17-18: “all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old, slaves, men and women”. On all of these God declares, “I will pour out my Spirit”. Compare this to the list of 16 in vs 8-11. Do you see a pattern developing? What is the church learning about its mission? What are the people in the street learning about what God is up to?

9. For extra credit, and a bit of fun (this is not a question), here's an example of a New Testament writer (Luke, in this case) playing with an Old Testament story (the Tower of Babel story from Genesis 11: 1-9):

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.” Genesis 11: 1-9)

In the Genesis story, all the people of the earth speak one language and attempt one “mighty work”—the building of a tower to heaven. God thwarts their effort by turning their one language into a babble of many languages.

In the Acts story God accomplishes one mighty work—pouring out the Holy Spirit “on all flesh”, and turns the babble of many languages into one message: the gospel of salvation for all the people of the earth.

Like the Medes and Elamites detail, this also is not accidental on Luke’s part. It is, rather, some pretty fine story telling.