

Sunday, June 4, 2017 - PENTECOST

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2

Sermon title: “Amazed, perplexed, and bewildered”

The story of Pentecost is a long one, so I plan to shorten it somewhat for morning worship. In your personal study, however, please read the entire account, including the response to Peter’s sermon.

1. Acts 1:15 tells us that “about 120 people” gathered in the upper room, and so it seems likely that ALL of them received the outpouring of the holy Spirit – not just the original 12. Reflect for a moment on the significance of this.
2. Acts 2:2 describes “the sound as of a rushing wind.” Wind and Spirit are of course closely correlated. See Genesis 1:2 where read that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The Hebrew word here for “wind” could also be translated as “spirit.” It should not be surprising, then, that the outpouring of God’s Spirit should be perceived as a wind which all felt.
3. Acts 2:3 describes “divided tongues, as of fire,” making clear that the Spirit came to all, but also to each one individually. Early in the Israelites’ journey to Canaan, we are told (in Numbers 9:15f) that God’s presence became obvious in “the appearance of fire” at night. So, a cloud by day, and fire by night, all indicating that God was with them and leading them. Why is all of this – wind and fire – important? Clearly, there is a continuity with the Old Testament. This experience is something new, in a way, but it draws heavily on what the people already knew and recognized.
4. What is the first “manifestation” of the Spirit’s presence? It’s the ability to speak in other languages. Vs. 7 makes clear that this ability was miraculous because these Galileans could not have learned these languages in any other way. Importantly, the languages being spoken were NOT some sort of “spirit language,” but rather actual languages which were understandable to those in the crowd. Vs. 8 – “Each one of us is hearing the language proper to the country in which he was born” (my translation!). Isn’t this an important point to remember in discussions about “speaking in tongues” today? Assuming that this gift is still available – some Christians say that this ability ceased with the death of the apostles – do these words tell us anything about what to expect when there is tongue speaking in worship?
5. Vs. 7 – the people in the streets had several reactions to what they were witnessing, but importantly the first reaction was to be “amazed and bewildered.” Note that “amazement” and “belief” are not the same thing! Anyone can be amazed, but belief is a separate category. In this story, it came later. Here’s what we should see: the dazzling display prompted by the outpouring of the Spirit produced amazement and bewilderment. It was Peter’s sermon, however, that produced belief (in many, but not all). You might want to reflect on how all of this is supposed to work – the work of the Spirit within us and then the ability to comprehend and believe. One conclusion might be that even the most dazzling sermon will be ineffective without the (prior) work of the Spirit which prepares us. Think of your own coming to faith. What was the role of the Spirit in preparing you for belief?
6. Vs. 42-47 are some of the most thrilling words in all of the New Testament. Every time the church seems tired, out-of-touch, complacent, etc., there is a desire to return to these verses and the happy experience of those earliest believers. There are four elements to their life together that believers need to recognize and claim: **1) the Apostles’ teaching, 2) fellowship, 3) breaking of bread** (not just table fellowship, but the sacrament is implied here as well), **and 4) “the prayers.”** What are the other important elements of their life together? Do you see them at IPC? What in this description should we be emphasizing more? What are we getting right?
7. Vs. 46 “Day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread in private houses....” – what these words seem to say (and what we know to be

true) is that Christian believers continued to worship side-by-side with Jews for a considerable period of time, perhaps a few decades. Christianity was not a new religion, but rather (at the beginning) a movement within Judaism. Not until the destruction of the Temple in 70 (or 72) AD did the Christian believers move away from Judaism in a decisive way. Christians today sometimes diminish or dismiss our Jewish roots, but these verses make clear that the separation did not happen at an early stage.

8. Vs. 45 – what do you make of the words “selling their property and distributing them to all, as any had need.” Is there something normative here? An expectation that Christians should live communally? (Many Christians groups over the centuries have made the interpretation.)
9. Vs. 47 – “Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Don’t these words presuppose that growth is not just a nice thing when it happens, but an expectation? Asked another way, shouldn’t growth be a standard by which we measure our health as a Christian body?
10. I’ve run out of room – and perhaps you’ve run out of time – but you might want to consider the Old Testament reading. These two stories are often paired together. In one God uses language to confuse and disperse people (because of their hubris). In the other God uses language to bring people together. Note that in Acts people are not re-united with one language, but the Spirit makes possible our unity in spite of our differences.

Wear red on Sunday for Pentecost!