

## “God’s Mighty Acts”

*Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23*

### Acts 2 [ESV]

**1** When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. **4** And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

**5** Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. **6** And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. **7** And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? **9** Parthians and Medes and 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, **11** both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians – we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” **12** And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” **13** But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

**14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. **15** For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. **16** But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

**17** ““And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on 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 on my male servants and female servants  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

**19** And I will show wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;

**20** the sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

**21** And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the  
Lord shall be saved.”

## **John 20 [ESV]**

**19** On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being  
locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood  
among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” **20** When he had said  
this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad  
when they saw the Lord. **21** Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you.  
As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” **22** And when he had  
said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.  
**23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold  
forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Brothers and sisters, grace to you this morning, and peace to you, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, often referred to as the Birthday of the Church. Pentecost comes from the Greek word “pentecoste,” which means “fiftieth,” and it marks the 50<sup>th</sup> day since Easter Sunday. And just as is the case with Easter, Pentecost has a corollary in the Jewish calendar. You’ll remember that the reason Jesus had gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room that Thursday night – the day we now refer to as Maundy Thursday - was to celebrate the Passover meal. At the Passover meal, Jews remember and give thanks to God for passing over them when they were slaves in Israel, not killing their firstborn sons, and for delivering them from slavery to Pharaoh through the waters of the Red Sea. Jesus was killed the day after Passover, and on the third day – the day we now refer to as Easter Sunday - rose from the dead to deliver us from our slavery to sin. The Jews count seven weeks after Passover to harvest the spring wheat. On the 50<sup>th</sup> day, they celebrate Shavuot, also called the Feast of Weeks, and they give thanks to God for the gift of life. Not only do they thank God for the harvest, but on Shavuot they also celebrate God’s giving the Ten Commandments to Israel – because that took place 50 days after the Jews’ deliverance through the Red Sea. After 50 days of wandering in the wilderness, God gives them the 10 Commandments, pointing the way to a new life with Him – a life guided by righteousness, a righteousness prescribed by Torah, by the Law. So during the fifty days between Passover and Shavuot, observant Jews count every day as being one day closer to their receiving the covenant of life with God. Counting those days is a spiritual discipline, a “[demonstration of] how much a Hebrew desires to accept the Torah in his own life.”<sup>1</sup>

So on this day about 2000 years ago, Jews from every nation had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot – the spring harvest of wheat and food

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, “Counting of the Omer,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counting\\_of\\_the\\_Omer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counting_of_the_Omer), retrieved June 4, 2017.

for God's people, and the birth of God's people through the covenant of the Ten Commandments. And on this day, an extraordinary event takes place. Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles as well as the Gospel bearing his name, tells us that the disciples were gathered all together in one place. And just as the law came down from the heavens on Mt. Sinai, Luke writes that a great roaring sound comes down from heaven and fills the house. Mind you, the house is NOT filled with a wind – it is filled with a sound like the wind. We read in verse 2, "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." The kind of sound the wind might make during a violent storm – some have suggested it might be like the sound made by an approaching tornado. And in the midst of this roar there appear above the disciples' heads "divided tongues," as of fire. The disciples are immediately filled with the Holy Spirit, Luke writes, and begin to speak with "other tongues," as the Spirit gave them utterance.

It behooves us to remember the disciples' situation at this moment. They are Nazarene Jews in Jerusalem. They are out-of-towners. Do you remember the last instruction Jesus gave to His disciples before ascending into heaven? In verse 4 of the previous chapter, we read, "And while staying with them [Jesus] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father." Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem because He knew that otherwise, they would have gone back to Galilee. Jerusalem is situated on a rocky hill, surrounded by other rocky hills, all of which are completely beige in color because of the limestone they're made of. They reflect the harsh sun up into your face and turn the city into an oven in the summer. Galilee, on the other hand, is a land of cool breezes, trees, fields, springs, and waterfalls – it's beautiful. The disciples were from Galilee. They were country folk, and Jerusalem was filled with city folk – not *just* city folk, but city folk who had condemned their Lord and Savior to be murdered. Had Jesus not commanded them to remain in Jerusalem, there's no reason to think that they wouldn't have headed back to Galilee as quickly as they could. But Jesus told them to stay, so they stayed.

Living in Jerusalem, they joined their fellow Jews in the faithful practice of counting the days until Shavuot, the day they would celebrate their new life with God.

But the new life they receive on this day is unlike any life that anyone had seen before. Not words inscribed on stone tablets, but a heaven-sent howling heard throughout the city. The sudden appearance, above each disciple's head, of what looked like a tongue of fire, and the spontaneous speaking in other tongues. The disciples had obeyed Jesus, had waited faithfully in a hostile city, and now – on this day – God was using them to herald the new life established not by the Torah – not by the Ten Commandments – but by God's living and Holy Spirit, come down from heaven as Jesus had foretold.

Furthermore, while God had given the Torah to the people of Israel, in this moment God bestows God's Holy Spirit upon people of *all* nations. Luke tells us that there were Jews "from every nation under heaven" living in Jerusalem at that time. We don't know whether they were all permanent residents, or if some perhaps were visiting temporarily to celebrate Passover and Shavuot. But like everyone else that day, they rush to see the cause of this tremendous sound. And Luke tells us beginning in verse 6 (reading now from the New Living Translation),

...they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers. 7They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, 8and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages!"

This is during the festival of Shavuot. Just as all of Israel had gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai centuries earlier, waiting to receive God's Word come down from heaven in the Law, on this day devout men from every nation were gathered in Jerusalem, counting the days until they would celebrate the receiving of that Word. God had given God's Torah-Word directly to God's people, that they might know and obey that Word in a new life, a life

of freedom from slavery. But on this day, they do not simply remember and celebrate. On this day, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, they hear with their own ears God's Word come down from heaven, a new Word of Life, a new Word of freedom. And this word, spoken to them in their native languages, is not words of command. Unlike Moses, the disciples do not bring commandments governing how God's people should live. The disciples bring a different word. What is that word? The Jews tell us in v. 11: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." They are not words telling people what they should do, in the future, but rather words testifying to what God has already done, in the past. Words bearing witness to God's mighty acts. And it is on the heels of this event, Luke tells us, that about three thousand people were baptized into the newborn church.

Which is the same order of magnitude as those baptized into the PCUSA for all of 2022. While the early church baptized 3,000 in one day, the PCUSA baptized just under 8,000 in a year.<sup>2</sup> This is a 25% decrease from the number baptized in 2019, the last year before the pandemic. During those three years the denomination's total membership dropped by almost 200,000, leaving us with a current membership of just over 1.1 million. That's down from a membership of 3.1 million when this denomination was formed forty years ago. In other words, a 67% decline in membership. Now, I realize that I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. I saw an article in the Presbyterian Outlook entitled "Have We Become Sears?" This was the same issue that announced the largest numerical and percentage membership decline since the denomination was founded. This issue was from July 19, 2009. Fourteen years ago. A child who was in kindergarten that year would, this week, have just completed their sophomore year of college.

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<sup>2</sup> PCUSA 2022 Comparative Summaries of Statistics, [https://pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/statistics/2022\\_stats\\_comparativesummaries.pdf](https://pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/statistics/2022_stats_comparativesummaries.pdf), retrieved 28 May 2023.

People tend to respond to this news in one of two ways. Either they succumb to disappointment and despair, bemoaning the shrinking numbers; or they succumb to anxiety and fear, and set about frantically trying to do something – anything – to stop the loss.

What I find interesting is that, in our passage this morning, we see God at work among a group of believers that has shrunk dramatically since the days before Jesus' crucifixion. While they are, or course, tremendously encouraged by the resurrection of their Lord, they're still at a loss as to what's next. Many churches today, faced with a decline in membership, react by trying to get more people to join them – somehow. They don't know what's next, so they try to attract people to their congregation.

Actually, this has been the model for the church in North America since the Second World War. For decades, going to church on Sundays was a core part of our culture. We didn't need to persuade people to go to church – we needed to persuade them to come to OUR church. Most everybody was going to go to church anyway, so “evangelism” became all about attracting people to your own congregation. This outlook was so common and widespread that it earned a nickname among those people who study the church: it's called “Attractional.” It means we focus on attracting people to our church. Maybe we tell them about our music program, or our youth ministry, or our preacher, or the great fellowship groups and Bible Studies we have. Whatever it is that we highlight, the focus is on getting them to come to our church.

Now, that approach can work when people have already decided that they're going to church, and just need to choose which one. Like someone who's decided to buy a new car: when they come to the dealer's, the salesman doesn't need to convince them to buy a car. He just needs to find one they like. The one that they find most attractive.

But there's a fundamental problem with that approach today. And that is, nobody's buying new cars. People aren't going to church. And the percentage of people who say they aren't interested in going to church is

growing faster than any other sector of society. And the reason this is a problem is because the mainline church – the denominations we're all familiar with, like the Presbyterians, and Methodists, and Lutherans, Congregational, Disciples of Christ, even the Baptists – continue to try to make ourselves more attractive than then others. But we fail to recognize that people just aren't coming on to the lot anymore. In a world like that, we could be so attractive that we win the Motor Trend Car of the Year award. But that still wouldn't make a bit of difference – because the fact is, no one's in the market for a new car anymore. Or at least, they're not looking for the kind of car that we're selling.

We could say that God was in the same situation that day in Jerusalem. Obviously, no one was interested in joining a sect whose leader had just been killed by the authorities and whose members were probably being watched by Israel's Department of Homeland Security. Frankly, I can't think of anything that would make the early church attractive to Jews. So how is it that the disciples end up baptizing three thousand people that day?

To answer that, I would suggest that we look at the second half of our reading – which is Peter's sermon to the crowds. It's particularly noteworthy, in light of our own situation, that not once does Peter mention how attractive his church is. In fact, he doesn't even mention the church. **At all.** Nothing about programs, or worship services, or the history of the building, or the community ministries. What Peter preaches is simply a continuation of what the Holy Spirit spoke through the disciples moments earlier. Do you remember what they said? In verse 11, the Jews who had gathered around at the sound said, "we hear them telling in our own tongues **the mighty works of God.**"

Focused on God, not the church

Focused on God's might and glory, not the church's programs and sanctuary



Focused on God's work through God's people, not God's people doing church work.

Kids looking up to the treetops.