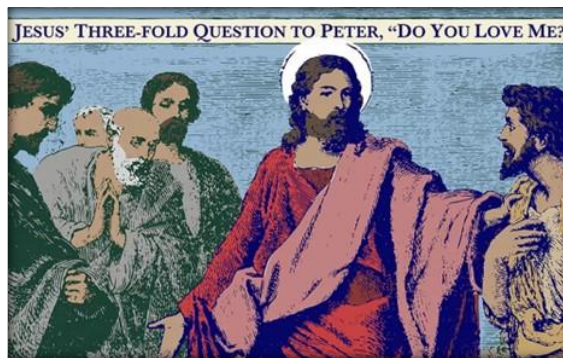


“Peter’s Pentecost”

Acts 2:14-36

What has the Spirit wrought?

What must Peter have thought when he looked back on that terrible night when Jesus had been arrested and hauled before Caiaphas, the high priest. During their last meal together, Jesus had foreseen Peter’s weakness, his cut and run attitude when things would get their toughest. Peter, in his unthinking enthusiasm, had told Jesus that he was ready to go with him to prison and even death . . . but Jesus knew better. He told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed at sunrise.



In the garden, Peter had slept while his Lord prayed in anguish over the ordeal that lay ahead. When the priests and soldiers arrived, Peter had stood on the outside, withdrawing from the crowd, distancing himself from the unfolding tragedy. As Jesus was led away, Peter had kept his distance, an observer only, neither a participant nor a defender.

And then, to his great everlasting shame, Peter had denied Jesus three times in quick succession. Each time, someone had said that they recognized Peter as one of those who had been following Jesus. Each time, Peter quickly and vehemently denied it. And he had wept bitterly over his weakness and his shame. Great rivers of tears had flowed in those early morning hours. But they hadn’t helped. He had just walked away and stayed away until the women had come to find him on Sunday morning with their astonishing story of angels and an empty tomb.¹

Pentecost—This weekend is the celebration of Pentecost, which has its roots in ancient Judaism and is still observed by Jews and Christians, though you’ll see that there is a very big difference.

In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, customarily called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). For the Jews, Pentecost was an agricultural festival, during which the community would show gratitude to God for the first fruits from that year’s crop, i.e., the early harvest.

Jesus was crucified during Passover in the spring. After his resurrection, Jesus spent about six weeks with various groups of disciples, teaching them and preparing them for his return to the Father. Jesus promised that after his departure, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their comforter and advocate. Jesus’ disciples were to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, came soon after Jesus’ departure. Because Pentecost was such a major festival, Jerusalem was stuffed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. In Acts 2, Luke tells us that the disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost in a room near the temple, when there was a sudden sound “like the rush of a mighty wind” and tongues of fire leapt from disciple to disciple. The crowds were astonished at this, each person hearing in his or her own language the disciples’ proclamations of God’s great deeds.

This outpouring of God’s Spirit marked the beginning of a new age. The disciples were new creations in God’s kingdom and the Holy Spirit would forever be God’s empowering presence in their lives. Indeed, the rest of Acts tells the story of how the Holy Spirit guided and directed the growth and development of the early church. Though we refer to Luke’s book as the Acts of the Apostles, it really ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And God’s Spirit is today, for each of us, God present with us, empowering us all to do God’s work.

¹ In Luke’s account, Peter disappears from the narrative after his three-time denial of Jesus. He is not mentioned in any of Friday’s events and doesn’t reappear in the narrative until Sunday.

Now, despite Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Peter's guilt and shame remained with him. In Jerusalem, he sat with the other believers waiting for...well, he wasn't sure, but Jesus had promised that there was yet more to come.

Suddenly, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, was present with them, empowering and strengthening them all. Peter felt himself moved and when some of the gathered crowd began to accuse the believers of drunkenness, he rose to speak. The world would never be the same.

Where did that come from?

Surely, many in the crowd drawn by the commotion that Pentecost morning knew all about Jesus, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And they had undoubtedly heard the claims and rumors about Jesus' having been resurrected. How could they not have heard? Two decades later, Paul would claim that 500 people had seen Jesus postresurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15). And, at least some in the crowd would have known that Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, one of those rustic rural types, perhaps illiterate and uneducated. And it is even possible that some had heard stories of Peter's denial of Jesus. It is doubtful that the three people who confronted Peter would have kept those stories to themselves. It wasn't every day that a self-professed Messiah was put on trial by Caiaphas and Pilate.

So, it isn't hard to imagine the shock and awe on the faces in the crowd, as Peter rose to speak. This fisherman was telling them that the believers were certainly not drunk. Rather, the long-awaited Day of the Lord had arrived, as promised by God through Joel and the prophets. And not only did Peter make the seemingly silly claim that the Day of the Lord had arrived,² he proceeded to claim that his fellow Jews had killed God's Messiah: "this man...you crucified and killed...Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

I wonder which part of Peter's sermon drew the strongest reaction from the crowd. His claim that Jesus, who had been humiliatingly crucified, was Messiah and had been resurrected by God, or his charge that Jesus' blood was on the crowd's hands. The onlookers had to be standing there in slack-jawed amazement. They had never witnessed anything like it in all their lives. Surely they asked themselves, "Where did that come from?" They would soon learn.

Wide-eyed wonderment was not the end of the story. Peter spoke the truth to that crowd and the truth cut right into their hearts. God, again in the person of the Holy Spirit, spoke to them through Peter and the crowd knew the truth of Peter's words. God had moved with great power that morning among the believers. Now, God was moving with the same power among the crowd. They knew their mistake; they knew their guilt. And they wanted to know what to do next.

Peter's answer to them ought to surprise you a bit. He doesn't tell them, "Love Jesus," nor does he say "Let Jesus into your heart." Rather, he tells them to repent and be baptized; i.e., turn your life around, embrace Jesus' way, and enter the fellowship of believers. This was the path to the forgiveness that the crowd sought. And thousands did just that.

How does one account for a comeback such as Peter's? In six weeks, he goes from a frightened denier of Jesus to a courageous man willing to risk death by telling the crowds the truth. We know that the explanation lies with God. That the power of God's Spirit strengthened and emboldened Peter and also moved thousands of onlookers to genuine repentance. The same God, by the same Spirit, moves among us, dwelling within each of us, empowering us to do God's work – to invite, to worship, to learn, to pray, to care, to give, to serve.

² For the Jews of Jesus day, the Day of the Lord was to be the BIG day, when God put the world right, raised all the dead, showed the world that the Jews had been right all along, and ushered in his kingdom to be ruled by God's Messiah. But on that Pentecost morning, the world looked nothing like that. It was just another Festival day in a long line of such days.