

Signs, Salvation, and the Spirit
By Jason Huff
Joel 2:23-32, Ephesians 1:1-14, Acts 2:1-41

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 2:1-41. This is a long section of Scripture, but one of the most important we'll ever read as it describes the birth of the church. Listen now to God's Word. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs -- we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.

Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."

The Holy Spirit might just be the greatest mystery in the whole Christian faith. Even though we don't comprehend the depths of the relationship between the Father and the Son, we understand it through our earthly experiences. But the Holy Spirit is something else entirely. We sing our doxology each week praising the "Holy Ghost," but that language makes the Spirit even more confusing than anything. Because He's not Casper or any other ghost in any sense that we think of. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity who is vitally engaged in human life; He's the one who makes it possible for us to be in relationship with the Father and the Son. He lives and breathes and works inside of us. While we never see a straightforward picture of the Spirit as a unique personality, we know His personality because we know the Father and the Son. They are all so completely one that when we know the Father and the Son, we know the Spirit. But when we see the Spirit working in Scripture, we need to pay attention so that we learn as much as we can about the person of God who lives within us.

Today's lesson is about the birth of the church, and that happens precisely because it's the moment when the Holy Spirit indwells the disciples and begins to live in every true believer. What we read today tells us both about the church and the Spirit because they are indelibly interconnected. And while the church began nearly 2000 years ago, the Spirit works in surprisingly similar ways even today. Let's listen to the voice of the Spirit at the birth of the church and see what He might be up to now.

As I studied this passage, the first thing that I found was this: *the Spirit edifies believers and ministers to unbelievers through signs and wonders*. When the Spirit first comes, the whole group sees tongues of fire resting on each of them. This is something that nobody else sees; it's the eventual noise that draws the crowd. This is something that makes the Holy Spirit real to the believers; they can see with their own eyes that the Holy Spirit is present and with them. Jesus has fulfilled the promise to send Him. In this moment, they realize that their lives have been changed. Then they begin praising God in languages they've never learned from all over the known world. That's what catches the attention of the crowd; they know this isn't business as usual. While some deny the power of the sign they've been shown, others listen because they've heard God praised in their own language.

Sometimes, in church history we've gotten things backwards. There are churches out there that believe that *the* evidence that you've been given the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues. That's made a lot of us Presbyterians over the years nervous! What if we don't have the Spirit because we've not been given that gift? Well, this passage proves that this is not something we need to worry about, and here's why. No one person has all the spiritual gifts; in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says as much. But moreover, spiritual gifts are never a proof for other believers; they are never a sign to show that "you're in the club." Spiritual gifts, Paul says, are given for the common good of the church, so that all of us may be encouraged and grow in faith. Among the gifts Paul mentions are wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, healing, faith, miraculous powers, speaking in tongues and translating tongues, and discernment. Different people have different gifts to build us up as a church. So we don't need to worry about this passage being a proof that we must all speak in tongues or display a particular spiritual gift. God gives those gifts through the Holy Spirit as He so desires.

So what do we make of signs and wonders, then, if they aren't proofs for believers? They are actually proof for unbelievers. When the disciples spoke in tongues, it convinced outsiders that something miraculous was going on. It was impossible for the disciples to have known all these languages – they were all from Galilee. It made them receptive because it was beyond what they could explain.

Signs and wonders still happen today. I am convinced that the spiritual gifts talked about in the Bible are still totally valid. It's amazing to hear stories from around the world how God is still using miracles to make Himself known. You can find verified stories of Muslims having visions where they are told a follower of Jesus is coming and to listen to them. There's an account among people I know where God orchestrated events over a period of 40 years so that a foreign missionary would have a link to an unknown villager in Haiti who would confirm the miraculous connection. Or taken the Karen people of Burma, who in 1795 told a British diplomat that they had been expecting a "white brother" for perhaps centuries who would tell them the full story of the God Y'wa. Their own stories passed down for generations told parallels to the Bible, despite a history of being surrounded and subjugated by local Buddhist tribes. When a missionary finally arrived in the early 1800s, God had prepared their hearts, and over 40% of the Karen people are Christians despite over 50 years of war and persecution.

I believe signs still exist in our culture as well. They often aren't as dramatic because our culture disbelieves the miraculous. Many would rather believe the absurd idea that the disciples could speak in tongues because they were drunk. But God still gives signs to people in America. Sometimes it's through timing – you become a friend to someone at the most difficult point in their life without even knowing it, and God works through that friendship to lead that person to Christ. Sometimes you are an answer to a person's prayer who doesn't even know who they're praying to. Sometimes it's just your lifestyle. A survey of Muslim converts to Christianity outside the US showed that the number one reason they changed beliefs was because they saw Christians living out their faith in everyday actions that showed they loved one another. We don't necessarily think of the truly Christian life as a sign or a miracle, but it is – if we have been transformed by God into new creations, there's nothing more miraculous on this earth.

The second thing I see for us in the passage is this: *the Spirit empowers willing believers with boldness and helps us speak in language that others understand.* When Peter speaks to the crowd, it's clear that he's still the same Peter we've seen throughout Luke – outspoken, definitely a leader – but he's also different. He's no longer wishy-washy, proclaiming Jesus is the Christ one minute and then arguing with Jesus about His plans the next. His words are clear and persuasive. The Spirit has gotten ahold of him and given him true boldness...not just bluster but genuine, godly courage. The Spirit is also working in the way in which Peter speaks. When Peter and John are arrested in Acts 4 and go before the chief priests, they amaze their interrogators because they are, in their own words, “ordinary and unschooled men.” Fishermen, even, not known for being eloquent. But the Spirit speaks through them.

It's also clear that the Spirit inspires us to speak to people in ways they comprehend. Peter's audience here is very Jewish; they knew the Old Testament scriptures, so he shows proofs for Jesus by quoting Joel and Psalms, which they all would have understood. But when Paul goes among the Gentiles, he starts by talking about knowing the God of creation. He doesn't use loaded words like sin or sanctification – he speaks the language they already know from their own experiences. When Paul goes among the philosophers of Athens, he talks to them about their monument to the unknown god – again, hitting them where they live.

What does this mean for us? It should be a relief. We learn our faith so that we understand the depths of God's love and mercy, and we learn evangelism so we have the tools in hand to share our faith when the time is right. But the Spirit is ultimately the one who guides and directs us how best to use those tools when we do speak to someone about God. We don't have to worry that we don't have the right words or we don't know enough theology. The Spirit will direct us. Most people aren't impressed by the words you say so much as the love you share when you say them. And if the Spirit guides us to those words, we don't have to worry about success because the Spirit's the one doing the heavy lifting. Even the courage to speak at all comes from the Spirit.

The only thing I see as a prerequisite is willingness. Peter was willing to be used by the Spirit. This is perhaps the biggest thing we need to pray for – for our fears and our worries to be replaced with a willingness to speak when the Spirit says “speak.” And by the Spirit's power, your willingness will break down barriers to hearing the Gospel. The truth is, it is your ability – given by the Spirit – to speak about your belief that wins people to faith. When you are willing to talk about your faith in simple, honest, direct ways with your friends, it usually means far more to them than the guy up front giving the sermon ever will. So be willing to let the Spirit use you, and He will prove faithful.

Last thing I wanted to talk about in this passage: *the Spirit teaches belief, repentance, and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as the way to eternal life.* At first, it's easy to miss that the crowd does in fact believe what Peter is saying. The word “believe” is never mentioned by Peter as the means to salvation and the Holy Spirit. But the whole Reformation was based on the idea that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone. Is there a conflict? Not in Peter's mind. You see, the people in Jerusalem already knew who Jesus was and what had happened. Peter's statement put it into context and showed Jesus was Savior and Lord. Their reaction, “what shall we do?”, was proof of their faith that what he was saying was true.

This is really important because belief is never just in the mind. We never just agree to Christian principles or the idea that Jesus is Savior and Lord. It would be as useless as thinking we know the President because we read the White House press briefings. Faith is not just mental assent but action that proves that we believe what we think. That's where the next step comes in.

The crowd asks, "What must we do?" They have believed the message; they know that they crucified Jesus; they believe He has returned and proven His word to be true. What next? Peter tells them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This is the call of the Spirit. The Spirit never draws attention to Himself but brings us to Christ, the one who died and rose again and through whom salvation comes. The Spirit always calls us to repentance – and the long and short of repentance is this: change your mind and heart. Turn from evil and turn towards righteousness. Leave selfishness and sin and hell behind and find heaven in the love of Christ and serving Him in holiness. The Spirit refuses to leave us unchanged; the Spirit requires us not to change ourselves – that's impossible in our sinful state – but instead simply to turn to Him and leave the changing up to Him. Even that power to turn itself comes as a gift of God's grace. But when we truly repent to show our faith is real, God welcomes us with open arms.

Baptism is another step in that process. Baptism is the point at which we leave the past behind and drown it, and come up from the waters a new and forgiven creation. But it's also the point at which we leave our claims to ourselves behind too. There is no turning back to reclaim the old self; the waters proclaim the death to self that we practice every day as we carry our crosses and follow Christ. But what a glorious road that is! When we die to our selfishness, we find new life in Christ we could have never imagined! But we must follow the Spirit's leading into the waters of death and rebirth to show our faith is real. For those who are baptized as infants, we make that stand at confirmation, showing that we truly believe the faith accepted for us by our parents.

The Spirit wants to move powerfully among us. He proved His power when 3,000 believers came to salvation in a single day, and again a few days later when 5,000 more believed when Peter spoke again. The Spirit desires to edify and minister to us by signs and wonders that prove that God is not only alive and well but wants to be reconciled to us. The Spirit wishes to use us as powerful tools to bring the lost back to Himself. The Spirit calls out to us to repent and be baptized to prove our faith – not just as a one-time thing, but to constantly turn towards our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to remember our baptism as we live new lives dedicated to Him. If you've never experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and given your life over to God completely, do it today. Because the Holy Spirit wants to make you whole and to use you for an incredible mission far greater than yourself – spreading the Kingdom of God far and wide. Will you let Him work in you today?