

Acts 2

Introduction:

Smoky Row! Let's begin with prayer today!

Prayer:

“Power From On High”:

Jesus says something cryptic at the end of Luke. He’s just appeared to his disciples, and they’re scared to death, which isn’t unreasonable, you know? He calms them down, and his last words to them before Luke ends his Gospel are these:

“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The disciples listen. They stay in Jerusalem, meeting every day at the Temple.

Luke continues the story of Jesus' followers in Acts. Immediately after this, Luke writes about something called “Pentecost.” Pentecost means “fiftieth,” and it’s shorthand for a religious festival called “Festival of Weeks,” or Shavuot. It’s still celebrated today, in various ways, but during Jesus’ time was one of the pilgrimage festivals, meaning folks would flood into Jerusalem.

Here’s what Luke writes. This is Acts, Chapter 2:

2 When Pentecost Day arrived, [the disciples] were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the

entire house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. 4 They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?"

And Luke lists 16 different places in the world these people are from. I won't read them.

They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!"

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through 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 will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.**

Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.

The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.

21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.[a]

22 “Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this.

23 In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. 24 God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him.

Peter, whose become remarkably savvy all of a sudden, talks about David for a bit, about Jesus’ death and the certainty of his resurrection, and the way in which this crowd had better adjust their view of God:

He continues

He was exalted to God's right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are seeing and hearing the results of his having done so.

The crowd asks what they ought to do. Peter says:

“Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites.”

Naked or Clothed:

What's important is that this is the moment the disciples are said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

This isn't the first time we've heard of the Holy Spirit, of course; Jesus was filled with the Spirit, too, in a way no one before him in the Bible was. Throughout the Old Testament the Spirit visits people now and then. The Spirit's time with a person is always described in temporary ways, enabling a person to do something they couldn't have ever done without the Spirit of God: speak for God, like the prophets do, perform some sort of miracle, reveal God through a word or a deed.

Before Jesus, the Spirit would come and go, though; it was something lent or borrowed; Jesus is the first one who doesn't lose the Spirit when it comes upon him.

But Jesus has just set up his followers to expect to be

“clothed” with “power from on high.” He’s implied that they are naked until it happens; that they have to stay together in the city, stay together in safety. And Peter says it’s in this moment that the Holy Spirit has come upon them, but more than that: Peter is saying that this is the moment all Israel has been waiting for since Joel wrote.

One of the greatest promises God gave His People, the promise of the Spirit coming on them in a way that the Spirit hasn’t ever before, has come true.

And the reason it’s come true is because Jesus, who is God, has made it come true.

Joel 2:32 Peter “everyone [of us]”:

Now. Peter is clearly talking to Judeans. To Israelites. And he’s talking to Israelites from all over the ancient world. Israelites who spent most of their time speaking languages that were incomprehensible to others in the crowd around them. They all spoke Hebrew, of course; they had to if they were going to be faithful, had to if they were going to make their pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

But when Peter ends his quote of Joel at verse 2:32 with “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” it seems like he thinks, at this point in Acts, when God means “everyone,” God really means “Israelites from all over,” maybe the occasional full convert, which was ridiculously rare.

Peter doesn’t realize, here, that God means more than just the Israelites.

Joel 2:32: Paul “[really,] everyone”

Paul quotes Joel 2:32, too. But he realizes something Peter won't learn for awhile in Acts. Paul realizes that God didn't mean just Israelites when God promised “everyone” in Joel 2. God meant, literally, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

In Romans 10, Paul makes this incredibly complex, beautiful argument about the relationship between the Israelites and the Gentiles, and why not all Israel has turned to the Messiah. Paul reminds us of what Moses said in Deuteronomy 30: “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” the word, he says, is “the message concerning faith that we proclaim:”

And that message is this:

9 If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”[e] 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”[f]

Paul quotes Joel 2:32 here as a proof that Jesus the Messiah wasn't just for ethnic Israel, or just for Gentiles, but was for “everyone.” All of us who trust Jesus and what he did for us have been adopted as his children, and the Spirit, which has

been sent to us, proves it.

Joel 2:32: Peter's Realization: "Everyone, really!"

Peter will get there. In Acts 10 he realizes that Gentiles can be followers of Jesus, too. Peter just had a dream in which God himself declared, "Don't declare unclean what I've made clean."

He doesn't really understand, but he's been sent to Cornelius, by the Spirit, who worships God in a second-class citizen sort of way: He's a Gentile, a Roman Soldier, and can't really live a Jewish life, but does what he can. He's a permanent outsider, as far as he knows, but he realizes that the God of Israel really is the God of all creation, so he'll approximate faithfulness as best as he's able, because that's all he's got to give. Peter's telling Cornelius there, about Jesus. And we read this:

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues[b] and praising God.

So Peter, eventually, realizes that Joel 2:32, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," is actually about everyone. God really intended "everyone" to be saved--slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male and female, erasing their differences, and the proof is that the Holy Spirit, which Joel promises, has come on us all.

Joel's Prophecy Realized:

Think about the impact of this, then:

God promised, through Joel, a future Day in which God would, as He says, “pour out my Spirit on all people.”

And it happened. But even the earliest Church didn't realize that God meant “all people,” that “everyone” could be saved. They thought God meant “all of our people,” “everyone of us”--even our female slaves, Crazy generous, God!--but not *them*, not *Gentiles*.

And then they realized God meant us Gentiles, too. The Spirit was the proof that God wanted all humanity in the Church, all kinds of people, that we ourselves could be fully privileged citizens of the kingdom of heaven, that we could avoid the “valley of judgment” that Joel talks about.

That there would come a day when Israel wasn't just Israel by genetics and culture, but Israel by faith. God's People would be re-formed around Jesus, who inherited Abraham's promise and passed it on to us, because whoever Jesus sent the Spirit to was automatically ingrafted into the family tree.

What Joel Didn't Know:

What Joel didn't realize when he communicated God's promise of the Holy Spirit being poured out was that it meant there had to be a new way to be God's People. It would necessitate a break in the life of Israel. This was such an unexpected thing not even Peter or the Disciples understood it before the Spirit came. Their first question to Jesus after his resurrection was if he was going to restore Israel to their place of prominence in the world. And why not; they knew Joel, right? Joel says as much.

It took Paul to realize, and articulate for the Church, the truth that this side of the Messiah, Gentiles could be fully God's People, too. He talks about the way we're benefactors of the Spirit's work, which transforms us who keep faith with Jesus into Jesus' image. (cf. 2 Cor 3). He reminds us that "The Lord is the Spirit" and that we're members of "a new covenant...of the Spirit...which gives life" (2 Cor 3:6).

Paul goes one further, suggesting that the Gentiles who trust in this Messiah help form what we could call a capital-S Spiritual Israel: We're "non-Israelite Israelites," "Abraham's Children by another father," and yet, we're a part of "all Israel" that will be saved (cf. Rom 11:26, 9:6,7).

And Paul reminds us "do not become proud, but stand in awe." (11:20). No one expected God to open his covenant relationship up to us, to offer us the promise he made to Abraham: that we'll be blessed and be made a blessing. But he did. We gentile sinners, we pagans, have been adopted as God's children, and given God's Spirit to live a New Covenant life.

Relevance:

I've been wondering how to make this relevant for us. I can think of two things we should notice.

Relevance: Forgetting Our Gratitude

We can't forget the fact that no one on the inside expected us to be made insiders. We've been added into God's plan to redeem the world, because the person at its center, Jesus, sent us "The Lord who is the Spirit." We're an add-on. And we just sort of have come, over 2,000 years, to forget it.

We've just forgotten that we're a late addition to the redemption plan of God.

But I think we still ought to have some deep appreciation of this, should have some sense of awe, because we've been brought into a family that we weren't born into.

Relevance: Learning From Cornelius In Acts 10

Because the truth is that Cornelius, who Peter hung out with, whose family received the Holy Spirit in a rush of power and presence, Cornelius, for all his attempts at faithfulness, for his discipline, for his commitment, for his hard work...he was outside God's Covenant, and there was no way in for him.

Very few of us would work as hard as Cornelius worked to be close to God if it meant, in the end, we just might not get anything for it, might not receive any of the promises Israel had been given. We're pay-off oriented people, by and large, pragmatic, and Cornelius was driven by a desire to know God despite the fact that he was an outsider and couldn't really become an insider.

I mean, am I wrong in thinking most of us wouldn't put in the time Cornelius does? The truth is that most of us feel like our margins are so thin we're incredibly impressed with ourselves if we make it to Life Group and Sunday morning in the same week, much less bring with us to those places an awareness of our souls to share with each other. Kids, Work, Parents, Hobbies, Stuff--to buy, to fix, to replace, to want, to enjoy. Life is just full, and we're just not feeling it today, you know?

In some very real ways, we take our privileged position as God's Children, as covenant partners God won't abandon, for

granted. I think we're supposed to, to a certain extent. Every child takes his or parent's love for granted; to do so is fundamental to childhood, and when they can't, we call it tragedy. To be a child is to take advantage of the excess of your parents love, it's to expect your grown-up to love you no matter what, and always give you a break, and think you're fabulous. That's childhood. That's childhood done right, and that doesn't exclude learning rules, and learning how to act, and growing up, but fundamentally, children take advantage, and take for granted, the committed love of their parents, and whenever they can't, we call it a shame.

And yet, as Paul reminds us, we're to "...grow up in every way into...Christ." We're meant, in some very real ways, to recognize our privilege, and use it to God's advantage, even as we continually rely on his loving, parental forgiveness for all our slip-shoddy faithlessness.

Mimicking Cornelius, Revealing Gratitude, by Nurturing Relationship:

And at least one way we can mimic the discipline and integrity of Cornelius, who lived for God even when he couldn't get close to God at all, and show our gratitude for God's unexpected inclusion of "everyone," not just "every kind of Jewish person," by "clothing" us with the Spirit, is to, basically, nurture our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

And that's hard in part because, oh, like any relationship it takes time, but unlike most relationships, we just don't think of the Spirit as a person to have a relationship with.

We talk about the Spirit as though the Spirit of God is an "essence" or a "gas" or something. We talk about being

“filled with the Spirit,” but stop there, usually, because we don’t know what else to say. Those few of us who have been blessed with some Pentecostal friends might think a little more broadly; most of us don't.

Spirit: Seen In Life:

The Bible tells us that the Spirit is our counselor, our comforter, our prayer partner: God in us, with us--in a way that those who don’t follow Jesus simply cannot see. As we spend time with the Spirit, depending on the Spirit’s comfort, the Spirit’s counsel, the Spirit’s power, our character begins to change--we actually begin to become like Jesus. Something of God happens. You know how you start to act like your friends when you hang out all the time? You start to use the same lingo they use, you start going to the same places they go, you start to like things you thought were totally lame before they were your friends; changes happen in your life, right?

As we spend time in this relationship with God who lives among us, and within us--albeit God in a form we cannot see with our eyes--we’re told that simply the exposure to the Spirit starts to change us; something happens over time, in the space between the Spirit and ourselves, so that our lives begin to deepen and our character begins to change and love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and goodness, and gentleness and self control just spring up in our lives the way exposure to the sun and the rain cause plants to grow: it just happens.

And it’s mysterious, but no more mysterious than plants growing, knowing when to seed and when to sprout; no more mysterious than spouses or friends of many many years

starting to sound and look alike.

Spirit: Holy Ghost

We lost something when we left behind the language of the “Holy Ghost.” I mean I know that we hear “ghost” and it’s scary and spooky and all that; forget that stuff. But there are also other things that we think about when we think of ghosts, particularly “ghosts of” someone; we think of a somebody, right, of a “being” who acts and speaks and is in continuity with the person who was alive. Of course, the Holy Spirit isn’t the Ghost of the Father or of Jesus; Jesus isn’t dead.

But hear me: the Holy Spirit is a lot more like a ghost than a gas. The Holy Spirit, we say, is a “person”--the Spirit acts, and thinks, and feels, and urges, and loves--the Spirit has a will, and wills to be our partners; desires to speak to us, desires to counsel us, desires to lead us, and love us, and train us, and be that person who, after minutes and months of time spent together, situations faced together, we begin to look alike--and the change isn’t on God’s side, folks.

A person can come alongside you, whisper to you, love you, give to you and lead you and help you; gas gives us indigestion. People inspire us; not essences. The Spirit isn’t a robot, dressed like God, that we turn on and off when we have a need. It’s not a digital assistant, just waiting to open up your playlist and misunderstand your instructions.

The Spirit is God. Joel's great prophecy not only opened us up to adoption as God's children, made us a part of God's People, salvation's inheritors, it also is the greatest gift offered to us by God. For some of us, this person is an

acquaintance or even a stranger; a weird stranger we feel uncomfortable around, for the rare saints among us the Spirit is more like a spouse than even our spouses are.

The author James Carrol talks about being “haunted by the Holy Ghost”--which is a powerful image to me--haunted by God, interrupted by God, pursued and personally addressed by God, the Holy Spirit; and not always when it’s convenient for us. And inspired by God to live like the one who we say we are all supposed to become like.

Spirit: A Question of Being

The real question that all this leaves us with is a question of being. What kind of person do we want to be? Do we want to be people who live up to the honor of receiving the Spirit as a friend, a partner, a helper? Or do we not care. On one side is gratitude, and living up to Cornelius' example; on the other side is...I don't know what it is. At best, we're spoiled; at worst, indifferent.

Do we want to be a person who has been so haunted by the Holy Ghost, that we are changed, over time, into the image of God? The same way we look like our friends or our spouses after a few decades of intimacy?

Spirit: Exercising Our Relationship

We can slow down or speed that transformation up depending on how seriously we take the spiritual exercises God offers us:

...praying, reading Scripture, fasting, noticing the things going on around us, leaving room in our lives to discover God, practicing creativity, exploring our grief,

and spending time with each other sharing... our lives, our possessions, our needs, ourselves. Cornelius did all these things, and he didn't have what we had. He did all these things to get as close as he could to a God who he couldn't get close to. He was excluded from the promises that we've received through no scheme or savvy planning of our own. Instead, God has drawn intimately close to us, and we by and large take for granted that we don't need to do much, and our relationship with God will be fine.

It's probably true. But we aren't meant to be just "fine." We're meant to realize that first vision of what God was going to do was incomplete. We've been invited into a relationship with God that didn't exist before the Spirit was poured out on humanity, the Holy Ghost let loose to haunt us all. We're children who live as members of a new covenant, members of God's family because we keep faith with the Son who sent us the Spirit. God has, out of overflowing love, adopted us into his family. We just take it for granted.

And we can take God for granted. We can take advantage of his mercy. And I don't think he's going to squash us as punishment. But we were meant to experience deeper intimacy with God than that.

Conclusion:

So when Joel says what he says, he has no idea what it'll mean. Not even Peter understood his own pronouncement this morning. Paul, who came along just a little later in the life of the Church got it, but he spent like 15 years in the desert, by himself, poring over all he knew about God before he made sense of it. And it's just been dropped in our laps: God loves you. God's for you. Jesus died and rose again so you

can, too. The Spirit proves it.

Let's try to recognize this honor and responsibility for what it is. We are members of a New Covenant, haunted by God, who assists us, and nurtures us, and reminds us of all we can be and all we're meant to be.

That's a relationship that is worth leaning into. If we discover we can't, because we don't even have the time to pray, much less reflect on the ways the Holy Spirit is present with us all the time, then let's get some help, figure out how we can restructure our lives a little bit, and do what we can to live up to the promise of the responsibility we've been blessed with.