

Reflections on Pentecost

This week's lectionary lessons focus on the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke, writing in the *Acts of the Apostles*, uses dramatic imagery:

2:2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 2:3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

Liturgical churches, such as St. John, change the colors of their altar cloths and paraments to red to remember the visible presence of the Spirit in the tongues of fire. The meaning behind the arrival of the Spirit is explained in a speech from Peter.

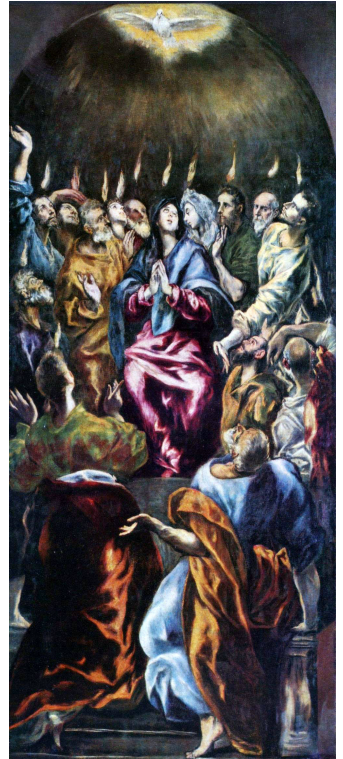
About 30% of the material in the *Acts of the Apostles* is from speeches woven into the larger narrative. These speeches are intrinsic to the book as they explain how God's will unfolds through the events recorded in the book. These speeches are noticeably different from many sermons that we hear today. The New Testament scholar Robert Wall notes that many preachers aim to give people what they like - sermons with an attention-grabbing opening and a tear-jerking conclusion. Instead, the speeches in Acts center on God's actions. This emphasis naturally comes about because they are often a response to challenges, such as Peter's speech in Acts 2.

The impetus for Peter's speech is a challenge from members of the crowd who doubt the reports that people heard the followers of Jesus speaking in their native language. Jews from all over the known world were gathered for their festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem, yet each one heard the apostles speaking in their own language. As Luke wrote in 2:6:

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

The crowd's confusion at the miracle is understandable, but the miracle is central to the moment. The Holy Spirit came to call the community to its new vocation of proclaiming that God raised the Messiah from the dead. The Spirit enables the community to express the wonders of God that they have seen in intelligible terms.

Peter's speech in Acts 2, his response to the challenge, sets the tone for much of the book. The followers of Jesus are empowered by the Spirit to witness to Jesus. The book of *Acts* then traces the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome under the leadership and empowerment of the Spirit.



Descent of the Holy Spirit, Greco, 1541-1614

In 2:17, Peter begins: *‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.’*

What does the phrase, “in the last days mean?” Such references are found in *Acts* and other books of the New Testament. I understand it to mean that the community was now entering a time when it was called to mission or witness, before the return of Christ. There was a time when Israel waited for the promised messiah. Hundreds of years. Then Jesus came and departed. Now, the coming of the Spirit inaugurates the time of mission for the community. The mission is simple: to proclaim that the messiah came, was killed, and then raised from the dead by God.

Peter sees the Christian witness to the risen Christ as vital and transformative. His speech concludes with:

2:20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 2:21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Having just witnessed the death and resurrection of his master, Peter is thinking in big ideas. For him, the death and resurrection of the messiah, his friend Jesus, changes everything. Peter sees humanity judged as sinful by God but offered mercy for the sake of God's son, Jesus Christ. This is the message proclaimed by the early Christians as they are led out into the wider world by the Spirit.

Notes:

This week's lectionary lessons can be found at the [Vanderbilt Divinity School library](#). They are:

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

John 7:37-39

Our thanks to Susan for offering the following three musical selections for our enrichment and reflection on the gift of the Spirit:

[Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song](#)

[There's a Spirit in the Air](#)

[Come Down O Love Divine](#)

For those who enjoy music from the “pre-Classical era,” consider this selection of a [Lutheran singing O Holy Spirit, Root of Life from Hildegard of Bingen](#) (1098-1179).