

The First Sermon

As I was working on worship planning for this month some weeks ago, I realized that I had never preached from this passage before and that intrigued me. For one thing, these verses fall between two other sets of verses from which I've spoken several times. The first 21 verses of this chapter contain the famous story of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus and Peter's explanation to the crowd that those who have been heard speaking in foreign languages are not drunk but fulfilling the prophecy of Joel that God will pour His Spirit out upon all flesh. The last six verses of the chapter are the nearly as famous description of the conduct of the early church, their communitarian lifestyle, and their reputation as good and generous neighbors.

The other thing that intrigued me about this passage is that it is the first public sermon by one of Jesus' disciples after his death, resurrection and ascension. The Gospels tell that Jesus sent his disciples out to teach and heal in pairs during his ministry and we know that they gathered together after the trauma and the joy that we remembered during Holy Week to console and encourage each other. But this sermon of Peter's on Pentecost is the first recorded incidence of one of the disciples publicly proclaiming the new faith.

Now, it's unlikely that what we have here in the second chapter of Acts is a verbatim reporting of what Peter said on that highly significant day. I doubt that anyone there truly realized just how significant a day it was, including Peter. Important days are often like that. So, it's unlikely there was a scribe, frantically trying to scribble down quotes for later publication. It's possible that Luke heard the sermon but unlikely – he's not shy about pointing out, later in Acts, which of Paul's experiences he shared and there's no indication from him here that he was present. It's possible that he met Peter later and got his reminiscences of the day. It's even more likely that Luke had a source or several sources that told him many years later how the fisherman's sermons tended to go and that Luke then "recreated" Peter's first sermon based on their testimony of his later sermons.

I hope you won't be put off by that scenario. For one thing, it was common practice during this time for a historian to "recreate" famous speeches in this way. The thought of the day was that as long as the writer captured the main sense of the speech and rendered it in a style that was consonant with the original speaker, that was fair play. It was frowned upon to add too many rhetorical flourishes of one's own, however. And really, we still do this today, in conversation. When reporting a previous conversation to a friend, we paraphrase the words that were spoken, trying to catch the meaning and the tone. And we have a good example of how we can catch a main theme to which a preacher often returns right here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. Remember when Bernie Turner was here for our Fiftieth Anniversary – he laughingly said, "You all know what I'm going to say already: Love everybody." It was his theme. He knew it, you knew it, and he knew that you knew it.

So what we've got here in this "first sermon," is a very good and sympathetic writer's attempt to capture the ongoing theme of Peter's sermons with details both recalled and imagined to honor the event and the meaning of this sermon. And the themes here, as well as some of the technique and the details, still speak to us today, nearly two thousand years later and nearly seven thousand miles away. There is the basic outline of what we call "the Gospel," the Good News of God. There is the framing of that message in language and images that the audience can relate to.

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There is the appeal to the hearers to separate from a broken, dysfunctional culture. And there is an underlying word of hope, a word we still crave and which we have come to expect any time the name of Jesus is invoked.

It shouldn't be a surprise that Peter gave a brief recap of the Jesus story in this first sermon nor that he continued to do so as an ongoing practice in his preaching. It may be hard for us to remember now after most of us have spent a lifetime hearing it in various ways but the story of the Nazarene carpenter was a long way from achieving a popular acclaim as "The Greatest Story Ever Told." Many of those in Jerusalem for the Pentecost observances would have been unaware even of the tumultuous events of fifty days prior. For those who'd been in Jerusalem and perhaps a part of either the welcoming crowd of Palm Sunday or the accusatory crowd of Good Friday, the whole Jesus incident would have been fading into memory as just another failed Messiah and just another Roman execution. But Peter tells or reminds them of the details that recast that ephemeral excitement into eternal joy.

First, Peter reminds them of the deeds of power done by Jesus which were an indication of his blessing by God. There would have been enough people in the crowd who had knowledge of these that their nodded and whispered agreement could have reassured the others as to the validity of Peter's message. It's one of the reasons that we still "give testimony," if you'll excuse that old-fashioned phrase. Here at Good Shepherd, we call it "Sharing our Joys and Concerns," and it's an important part of what we do each Sunday. It's our way of reminding each other that God does continue to bless us, in ways small and large, likely and unlikely; that God does indeed have the power to change our lives both in ways that we plead for and that catch us by surprise.

Peter then points out that this good man who had done so much to help people had been sent to his death by the very people he'd been trying to help, namely those same residents of Jerusalem who'd been complicit in his death via the Sanhedrin and the Roman occupiers. Lest we despise the people of Jerusalem for this, I think we should confess what still happens to those who raise their voices for equity and justice and peace in our own time: Mohandas Gandhi, assassinated; Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated; Robert Kennedy, assassinated; Oscar Romero, assassinated; Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated; Brother Roger of Taizé, assassinated; Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 28 years... need I go on?

But unlike those I just named, who live only in our memories, Peter tells us that God had something special planned for Jesus. God raised him up, freed him from the power of death, and to that, Peter says, he and his friends were witnesses. Now we, of course, did not have the privilege of seeing the resurrected Christ in his bodily form. But this aspect of Peter's sermon should resonate with us nonetheless and we should be able to confidently affirm it in our own conversation about Jesus. Each of us has felt the living presence of Jesus in our lives, perhaps in a fleeting but still powerful way. Unlike Thomas, we have not been convinced of the resurrection power of Jesus by seeing the nail holes in his hands and the wound in his side. We are the ones of whom Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But we have just as much reason as Peter to say, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

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Now, I have skipped over a large section of Peter's sermon, that in which he used quotations from the Psalms and commonly held belief about David to prove his point about Jesus. To our ears, Peter's exegesis of a far less well-known Biblical passage is either strained or boring. We don't use the Psalms as part of our everyday experience as the Jews of Jesus' day probably did. We know a few of them quite well, either in their translated form in our Old Testament or in more modern adaptations in songs of faith and praise. But the vast majority of them are obscure to us and Peter's emphasis on David's relationship to the messiah seems rather beside the point. But it would not have been so to Peter's initial audience. As Jews longing for a return to political freedom, David would have been a key figure in their history, more profound to them than Washington or Lincoln to us. Peter used what was important to his audience to help him explain the story of Jesus.

All preachers strive to do this and I would suggest that all of us need to learn to do it in our own way to make our faith explicable to our neighbors. Some of you will remember that two Sundays ago, I used illustrations from several very popular books and movies to shed new light on the story of the Resurrection. I was criticized for this, by the way, by a friend who read my sermon online, because she said she'd never read any of the books or seen any of the movies. But I knew that many of you, as well as a high percentage of whoever might visit us in worship that day, had done so. Not every illustration is going to touch every person. You can't talk about the Biblical concept of sacrifice by referring to a bunt play to someone who doesn't know baseball. But if you know your friend is a Trekker, you can talk about Spock's death in "The Wrath of Khan." Or if they are into musicals, you can draw a parallel to Jean Valjean's sacrifices for Cosette and Marius in *Les Misérables*. Like Peter, all of us who have experienced the truth of God's love in our lives are called to use whatever we can from the culture around us to make it explicable to our neighbors.

We are called, as the teaching of Jesus in John chapter 17 has often been paraphrased, to be in the world but not of the world. Peter gives his own version of this call when those present for his sermon at Pentecost say to him and the others, "Brothers, what should we do?" "Repent," says Peter. "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." I always think it's important to review the meaning of the word "repent" as the New Testament uses it. It's not about sackcloth and ashes and fasting and beating your breast and wailing, "I'm so sorry." You can do that if it helps you, of course, but that's not what it's about at all. The Greek word is *metanoia*, and it means to change your mind, to turn around. When Peter said, "repent," he was talking about reorienting one's life, changing the focus of it from the things that society says are important to the things that God says are important. For us, perhaps, it's about changing the focus of our lives from making money and having an important career to treating other people as we would be treated, making sure that they are treated fairly rather than ignoring the needs of others to get what we want. Or perhaps it's to change our focus from retirement leisure, which God knows we've earned, to retirement service, which God knows others need.

Like Peter's contemporaries, we still need, with God's help, to save ourselves from this corrupt generation. Generation in this context does not mean an age-related cohort of the population but rather the era defined by the spirit of that generation. Whenever I read this exhortation from Peter, I am always reminded (and this dates me, I know) of the rock song by The Who, "My Generation." An anthem of frustrated youth, the song was written by the 20-year old Pete

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Townsend and performed by him and his 19, 20, & 21-year old cohorts and is still being sung by them in concerts now that they are in their 70s, which strikes me as vaguely ridiculous. Of the four original members of the band, only drummer Keith Moon could claim to live up to the infamous line, “Hope I die before I get old,” expiring at the ripe age of 32. But the song was not meant to express merely the truth of those born in 1944-1946 but rather of all those angry young men in their late teens and early twenties. In the same way, Peter’s reference to “this corrupt generation,” much like Jesus’ references to “this generation,” was not meant as descriptive of those living in Palestine in the reign of Tiberius but rather of all those who continue to live in the spirit of those out of harmony with God. All who continue to live in self-centeredness rather than in basing their lives in love for others must turn, must reorient, must repent, to escape the death-dealing influence of what the New English Bible translates “this crooked age” and experience life abundant and everlasting.

But should our situation sound too dire, Peter has provided us with words of Good News. If we turn our lives around and follow Jesus, he says, “your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” The hope that David lived in and saw for his descendant is for us as well. In this Easter season, we are reminded that the Resurrected One, Jesus, was merely the first fruits of those to be saved from spiritual death. Like him, we will experience the grave but like him its power will not hold us.

On this first Sunday of the month, we have another reminder of what is in store for us. It is an enacted metaphor rather than one we talk about, a sensory remembrance of a story we all know well. The Passover meal was meant to remind the Israelites of the saving power of God when God delivered them from the bondage of slavery. In his last supper with them before the cross, Jesus used that meal to help teach his disciples that God’s saving power reached beyond death, that for all those who would accept it there is to be a banquet of celebration in the life to come. Today, as we prepare our hearts to enter into that living memory, we give thanks to God for raising Jesus and for offering the resurrection life to us, not only in the future beyond death but here and now, giving us the power of the Holy Spirit to be freed from this crooked age, to turn to God, and to live lives that bring a little bit of the banquet here to this time and place. For the great things that God has done and continues to do in our lives, thanks be to God.