

Equipped for Witness
Acts 2:1-21

What difference can this small congregation possibly make in the world-wide, age-long effort to expand the Kingdom of God? I mean, even before all this COVID craziness started, we weren't exactly rolling in resources here in southwest Mississippi. In fact, according to the census bureau, both Warren and Claiborne Counties are losing population, not gaining it. And let's face it – there are lots of bigger congregations right up the road, churches with the money and the manpower to offer all sorts of programs for all age groups.

Now I know, these days every congregation has had to shift to online ministry, and that has leveled the playing field to some extent. But it's still the big churches that have the edge, with their IT consultants and their slick video productions, right? I mean, it's First Pres. Jackson that's on WLBT every Sunday morning, not First Pres. Port Gibson.

But when you think about it, that's the same sort of situation that those Christians in that upper room faced on the morning of Pentecost, isn't it? As the Jerusalem crowd pointed out in verse 7, most of Jesus' disciples were from Galilee, up near the northern border of the land of Israel. Galilee was a place that the big city folks from Jerusalem generally derided as being too close to the pagan world – Galileans were Ancient Israel's version of hicks from the sticks.

And how could Jesus' disciples possibly compete with what was going on at the great Temple of God just down the street, with its huge choirs and magnificent architecture? After all, the crowds gathered in the streets hadn't come to hear any of them – they had come to offer their sacrifices at the Temple, participating in all the pomp and pageantry of one of the three great annual festivals prescribed by the Law of Moses. What could a bunch of unsophisticated street preachers say or do that could possibly attract any attention?

Well, we know what happened. God poured out His Spirit on them in a mighty way. There was a sound like a mighty rushing wind – think about a tornado or a hurricane. There were tongues of fire resting on each of them, but not burning any of them up – probably something like the burning bush that Moses saw. But most amazingly, the disciples started proclaiming the gospel in all sorts of different languages. No ceremony in the Temple, however impressive, could match any of that!

But let's face it – neither can we. Oh sure, Port Gibson experienced a widespread revival back in the 1830's. Later on, in the fall of 1891, Rev. George Inge held a community tent meeting that resulted in 27 people joining this congregation. But there's been no nationwide revival since the 1860's, and it shows. Our families are in tatters, our political parties are deadlocked, and our streets are filled with violence. What can this small congregation in this out-of-the-way place possibly do to turn things around?

Well, how did Peter explain the miraculous events described in today's passage? Or more precisely, what did the prophet Joel say, whom Peter quoted in verses 17 and 18? "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of 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.¹⁸ And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

Now, think about that. Think about the people the Holy Spirit chose to anoint on that first Pentecost. You see, it wasn't just Peter. It wasn't just the 12 apostles – after all, the gospel was miraculously being proclaimed in at least 15 different languages in verses 9-11, so there had to be more than 12 who had miraculously learned new languages. And remember, verse 1 says that they were all with one accord in one place – and back in chapter 1, verse 15 we learn that there were about 120 followers of Jesus gathered for worship and prayer. Verse 2 goes on to say that the wind – and in Hebrew, the word for breath and wind and Spirit is the same word – filled the whole house. Verse 3 says the tongues of fire sat on each one of them. Verse 4 says they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

That's why Peter could say that Joel had accurately described what would happen on that day – God had poured out His Spirit on all the believers, on all the servants of God, on the men and the women, on the young and the old. And they had begun to do exactly what Joel had predicted – they had begun to prophesy, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, Peter was so confident that the gift of the Holy Spirit was for all believers that he extended this offer at the end of his sermon, a passage we'll examine in more detail next week: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." As Joel said, the Spirit of God is for all those who turn to Him in faith, all those who receive Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord.

And that means it doesn't matter how many we are or how few we are. It doesn't matter how big or small our budgets may be, how many or how few staff members we may have. Every Christian has been given the Spirit of God, and that means every Christian has the most important equipment necessary for the ministry to which God is sending each of us.

But how can that be true? After all, those first disciples were given the ability to speak all the languages of the people who were standing in the streets of Jerusalem, people who had come from all over the known world. We can't do that. And we can't have the same kind of media presence that all those big churches with big budgets have. And we don't have the growing population around us that will allow us to plant new congregations like those big churches do.

Perhaps not. But then, God hasn't put us in a big city, has He? God hasn't put us in a growing area where lots of new church plants are needed, has He? And God hasn't surrounded us with people who speak all different kinds of languages, either. I mean, around here, if you speak two languages, English and Southern, you can pretty much get by, right?

But God has placed each one of us in a network of family and friends, colleagues and coworkers. God has given us many relationships with people whose language we share, people into whose lives we can speak the truth of God's love and grace.

Moreover, hasn't God been helping all of us to learn some different languages recently, some new ways of communicating? Just think what this Facebook page has allowed us to do – our total attendance online is a whole lot more than we had coming to Yokena and First Port Gibson put together, even before the COVID crisis made us all stay home. More people are also engaging with us in Bible study and gathering for public prayer, even while we have to be physically separated. In other words, we've had to learn the languages of Facebook and Zoom, and those languages have allowed us to reach out to more of our neighbors with the good news of Jesus Christ.

And the same thing can be true for you, for everyone who is worshipping with us on Facebook or You Tube. We can all use all the communication platforms available to us to share the truth and love and justice and righteousness of Jesus Christ with everyone in our network of friends and family – even if we can't be physically with them right now. In this way, we can all get involved in fulfilling the prophecy of Joel – sons and daughters, the young and the old, everyone who has the Spirit of God within us can use every means at our disposal to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God.

For make no mistake – Christ's Kingdom is indeed coming. Both Joel and Peter proclaimed that there would be, at the end of history, a great and awesome Day of the Lord. And however impressive the wind and the fire may have been on that first Pentecost Sunday, that's nothing compared to the signs Joel said everyone will see on the day Jesus shows up – wonders in heaven, and signs on earth. Isaiah and Ezekiel agreed, and Jesus affirmed the teachings of all three prophets when He said that on that day, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken.²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:24-26).

Why is all that so important? Because if everyone who claims Christ as Savior and bows the knee to Him as Lord is equipped by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Him, and if all Christians are surrounded by people with whom we share a common language and culture, people to whom we are thus able to bear witness to Him, the inescapable fact of Christ's imminent return makes our witness to Him of the highest urgency. For on the great Day of the Lord, both Peter and Joel agree, it is those who call on the name of the Lord who will be saved in the midst of that unimaginable, world-shattering cataclysm.

In other words, Jesus isn't just an interesting teacher, who challenges all of us to be kinder and more loving to one another. If that were the case, He would never have been crucified. And Jesus wasn't some sort of political or economic revolutionary, who wanted all His followers to rise up and destroy the unjust social structures that were oppressing them. If that were the case, the Jerusalem crowd never would have turned on Him, screaming for Barabbas to be released to them instead.

No, the cross and the empty tomb prove Jesus' claims, claims that are much more sweeping, much more demanding, much more exclusive and absolute. For Jesus claims to be nothing less than the Son of God, the One Who holds all power in Heaven and on earth, the One Who deserves the allegiance and loyalty of every human being who has ever lived, regardless of race or culture or creed. And He claims to be the only Savior of the world, the only One through Whom anyone can be saved from the punishment due to all our sins, the only One Who can restore any of us to a right relationship with our Creator and our King.

Next week, we'll look more closely at the content of Peter's sermon, and see what effect it had on his listeners. But for now, let's rejoice that God has poured out His Spirit on all who trust in Christ, equipping us to bear witness to His life, death, resurrection and ascension. Let's thank God for His Spirit, Who helps us to welcome all those we know, all those with whom we share a common language to accept His gracious pardon. And let's proclaim Christ to the world – before it's too late.