

## Preaching the Word Acts 2:14-41

Let's review. We've spent most of the last three months hiding from an invisible virus. Then, just when many of our businesses were reopening, our largest cities have exploded in racially-charged protests and violence. And now, the first tropical storm of the season is hitting the Gulf Coast, requiring Mississippians of all races to perform the impossible task of wearing masks and retaining social distance inside tiny saferooms. Oh, and don't forget the plague of buffalo gnats, followed by the equally odious if easier-to-swat horseflies. If there was ever a time when people needed to hear some good news, if there was ever a time when people needed the hope and the challenge and the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's now.

But even though we know all sorts of people who need this message, who need to know Christ or to know Him better, and even though our modern means of electronic communication allow us to reach across the globe with the good news of Jesus, how can we ever hope to get people to listen to us, let alone believe what we're saying? How can any of us, for example, ever hope to have the same kind of impact Peter's first sermon had? I mean, after he finished preaching, 3000 people came forward to be baptized and to join the church. What preacher wouldn't love to have such a tremendous impact over the course of a whole career, let alone after just one day?

Of course, it wasn't all Peter's doing, was it? As we noticed last week, in the first part of his sermon he pointed to the writings of the Old Testament prophet Joel, who said that in the last days, the Holy Spirit would be poured out in a rich and full way, and that both men and women would prophesy. Peter said that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, and thus that his own message was truly inspired by God. And again, what preacher wouldn't have success while the Spirit of God was moving in him and in his listeners in such a powerful way?

And so it would be easy for us to think that this Pentecost sermon was an anomaly, a one-time miracle that took place long ago and far away. It would be easy to imagine that none of us could ever have such success in communicating the gospel. It would be easy to give up hope of having any positive impact on the increasingly angry, fractured, frightened culture around us.

But let's take a closer look at this sermon of Peter's. For if we can't control the movements of the Holy Spirit, we can learn a lot from this message about how to present the gospel at any time, in any season, to anyone.

In the first place, even though the power of the Holy Spirit was obviously being poured out all around him, and even though Peter himself had a divine flame of fire resting upon him, it is interesting to note what Peter doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Thus saith the Lord," as so many of the Old Testament prophets did. Even though he and the rest of the disciples had clearly been given a supernatural ability to speak in different languages, he made no attempt to appeal to any sort of exclusive knowledge, any kind of secret revelation that God had given to him alone.

Instead, Peter's sermon was based on things that his listeners already knew. As devout Jews, they were already familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, the text of which makes up a little less than 40% of the sermon. And those who were from Jerusalem also knew quite a bit about Jesus. In fact, Peter points out that some of them had witnessed His miracles, and that many others had witnessed His crucifixion, which had taken place just outside that very city a little over a month previously.

No, the only piece of new information that Peter provides to his listeners is his personal testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. But even that knowledge hadn't come to him in any sort of supernatural way. Along with hundreds of other people, he had seen the risen Christ, not in a vision or prophetic ecstasy, but with his real, physical eyes. He had heard the voice of the resurrected Jesus with his real, physical ears.

In short, in this sermon, Peter isn't speaking as Moses or Isaiah or even John the Baptist did, as a prophet to the people. He is speaking as a man to other men, quoting Scripture and appealing to the simple facts of history.

This is good news for us modern-day evangelists, isn't it? For it means that, if you want to tell people about Jesus, you don't need to have some mystical experience, some personal revelation from God. Instead, you and I have access to the same tools that Peter had. We can point to the Old Testament Scriptures with all their prophecies about Jesus. We can appeal to the eyewitness accounts of the ministry and resurrection of Jesus that the apostles wrote down for us in the New Testament. And to the extent that our evangelistic efforts are rooted in the source of Peter's message, the Word of God, we should expect those efforts to bear fruit.

But the second thing we learn from Peter's sermon isn't such good news. For if we can appeal to the same Scriptures which Peter quoted, it is those same Scriptures which speak so clearly and with such fervor against the sin of mankind. In short, in our evangelistic efforts we must deal honestly with the problem of human sin.

Of course, many, many church-growth experts these days would firmly disagree. They say that we should try instead to meet the felt needs of our listeners. They say that we should draw people to Christ by speaking only of His love.

Now, nothing could be truer than to say that Jesus Christ welcomes sinners. Perhaps the best-known verse in the whole Bible, John 3:16, says that it was out of His great love for the world that God sent His Son to be the Savior of whoever would believe in, would trust in Him. Of course our evangelism should include the welcome of Christ, Who promised rest to the weary and to the heavy-laden if they would come to Him. Of course we should repeat the promise of Christ not to cast out any who come to Him.

But there is more to the gospel than forgiveness. After all, in John 3:19 we read of the reason that Jesus had to die to save us – the fact that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. And in John 3:18 we read that men are condemned if they do not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

In other words, every proclamation of the gospel must include the reason for the gospel, the problem of sin. And so instead of tiptoeing around the issue, as we would probably be tempted to do, Peter minces no words. In verse 23 he accuses the crowd of having crucified Jesus. And just so there would be no mistake, he repeats this charge in verse 36. And his charges rang true, as so many of his listeners were no doubt part of that same Jerusalem mob that had cried out for the blood of Christ not two months previously.

And all that means that, if we would accurately present the claims of Christ to the world, we must not skirt the issue of sin. No, we don't have to be jerks about it, and we certainly shouldn't set ourselves up as thinking we are better than anyone else. But as we proclaim the unconditional love of Christ for sinners, we must at the same time proclaim that He found it necessary to die to destroy sin. Yes, God in His grace loves us just the way we are, but in His holiness, He loves us too much to allow us to stay the way we are.

That's why Peter urged his listeners in verse 38 to repent, to turn away from their sins. That's why Peter urged his listeners in verse 40 to be saved from, to separate themselves from the perversity of the world. A gospel that doesn't preach both law and grace, a gospel that doesn't preach both warning and welcome is incomplete at best and dangerous at worst.

But there's one more surprise that Peter's sermon has for us. For all too often, we expect someone who is giving his testimony to talk about how Jesus brought radical transformation to his personal life. You've probably heard such stories, and Peter certainly had one to tell. Remember, this is the same guy who, on the night that Judas betrayed Jesus, joined in that betrayal, refusing to admit even to a slave girl that he knew Jesus. If many of Peter's Pentecost listeners had demanded on Good Friday that Jesus be crucified, it was Peter who was guilty of abandoning his best friend.

But what a difference the resurrection of Christ made in Peter's life! What courage the filling of the Holy Spirit produced in him! As he stood up to speak, he was no longer afraid to proclaim the name of Christ, even while standing in the midst of those who had crucified Him! Instead, Peter was so bold as to accuse them of the most heinous crime in the history of the world!

So of course Peter could have done what so many modern-day evangelists do. He could have pointed to his own experience of how Christ had changed his life to urge his listeners to be transformed in a similar way. But the interesting thing is that he doesn't do that. In fact, he doesn't draw any attention to himself at all. No, instead of focusing on the change that had taken place in his own life, Peter chooses to emphasize the reason for that change. You see, Peter's sermon wasn't about Peter – it was about Jesus.

Yes, it was about Jesus, a real man from a real town in Galilee called Nazareth. It was about the Jesus Who did all sorts of miracles by the power of God, miracles that are recorded in the New Testament. It was about Jesus, about how He was crucified according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God so that all who call on His name might be saved, just as the prophet Joel said. It was about Jesus, Who, as Peter points out in verse 31, rose from the dead according to the prophecy of David, who had written those words about Jesus in Psalm 16 some 1000 years earlier. It was about Jesus Who walked out of that tomb on the third day, as Peter and the rest of the apostles saw with their own eyes. It was about Jesus Who, through His life, death, and resurrection, proved that He isn't just a human being but also the Lord – the Son of God. He is the Christ – the Messiah Who has ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, ruling and reigning over all the earth forever.

Yes, Peter shows us that evangelism at its root is all about Jesus, and this may be the best news of all for us Presbyterian types, especially for those of us who have grown up in the church and have never known a time when we haven't known or trusted in Jesus. For Peter's first sermon proves that you don't have to have an amazing story of personal change in order to bear witness to Jesus. The important thing is to talk about Jesus, not about yourself.

And all of that means that all of us can witness to Jesus in the same sort of way that Peter did. For let's face it – if you know even the most basic of Biblical truths, you can speak a word from God at a time when a friend needs to hear it. If you know someone who is doing something sinful, something that the Bible condemns, or if you know someone who is not doing something that the Bible commands, you can speak a word from God, a word of warning in an appropriate time and place.

In sum, if you know anything about Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, you can tell the part of the story you know. You don't have to talk about yourself – tell about Jesus. Tell about how He died so that we might live. Tell about how God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to glory. Tell about how He is coming again, on the day that the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall be turned to blood, as the prophet Joel said. Tell about how all who call on His name, all who place their trust in Him, will be saved on that day.

Yes, praise Him! Praise Him! Tell of His excellent greatness! And who knows? As we remain faithful to the truth of the Scriptures, as we are honest about our own need for a Savior, and as we keep the focus on Jesus Himself, perhaps the Holy Spirit will be gracious to do the same sort of thing He did on Pentecost. Maybe He will bless our efforts and pour out His power, bringing those who listen to faith in Christ. But no matter what God decides to do, let's keep the focus on Jesus. Let's keep praising Him, even in joyful song.