



*Texts in Context*

**Pentecost—The Day of the Lord\***

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According to Jewish tradition, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai fifty days after leaving Egypt, so the festival of Weeks (Pentecost) came to commemorate the giving of the law. For our purposes also, the remembrance of Sinai will be fruitful for exegesis and preaching. The Day of the Lord, a recurring theme in Joel, may be a useful concept around which to focus emphases of both law and promise.

I. THE TEXTS

Both the Old Testament (Joel 2:28-29) and New Testament readings (Acts 2:1-21) for the Day of Pentecost (Series A) reflect the basic Jewishness of the festival. Gentiles are not mentioned within the texts, although they may be intimated in other material from Joel and from the various languages in Acts. The primary theme of Joel is repentance in the face of impending judgment, both on Israel and on the surrounding nations. Indeed, the call to repentance that precedes today's lesson (Joel 2:12-19) is used in all three series (A, B, C) for the Ash Wednesday reading. But following that (Joel 2:18-27) and on into chapter 3 we find words of refreshing promise. The Day of the Lord is therefore one which includes both judgment and promise, and in each case it involves divine intervention.

In the Pentecost lesson, we learn that God will intervene by pouring out his Spirit (*ruah*), the same Spirit which was the agent at creation and promises to bring about a new creation. This is also reflected in the Psalm for the day (Ps 104:31), "You send forth your spirit and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth." The primary emphasis in this whole section is the promise that the Day of the Lord will bring about a social revolution. With his power, Yahweh will establish life in full fellowship among the deprived, imperilled, disadvantaged. All, without excep-

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tion, will be empowered by the certainty of God's intervention on his people's behalf. Before the riches of such an outpouring, all distinctions of gender, age, and class will retreat. Thus, for Israel, the Day of the Lord begins with the reception of the Spirit. What makes this revolutionary is that normally the Spirit was given only to the few, e.g., judges, kings, and the prophets, and

that only sporadically. It came to Saul, and then departed; Samuel anointed David, and then the Spirit was silent; it was given to Samson, and then left. Now the Spirit is available to “all flesh” and that continuously (cf. also Isa 44:3).

The relationship between Joel 2 and Acts 2 is more than mere prophecy and fulfillment. Instead, the fulfillment exhausts the prophecy; it explodes it. The proclamation of Gal 3:27 (“neither Jew nor Greek”) and the promise of the verses preceding our text (Joel 2:26-27) go well beyond prophesying and dreaming dreams. God’s fulfillment of the prophecy exceeds all expectations which limit themselves to the literal text of the promise. With this in mind, one possible theme for the day could be “Out of Control.”

In Acts 2:1-21 the promise given to Peter was to “you and to your children,” which again emphasizes the Jewishness of the event. Although we usually confine our understanding of Pentecost to a Christian focus, the day has its roots in the Jewish tradition. We may sing “Happy Birthday” to the church, but a fuller understanding of its meaning can be found in its roots.

One familiar and oft-repeated theme is that Pentecost was a reversal of the confusion of tongues experienced at Babel. Just as humanity was divided by the profusion of tongues, so at Pentecost the gift of languages/tongues was a sign of unity in Christ. Another interpretation of the event may have homiletical possibilities. This is the rabbinic tradition that at Sinai all Israel heard the Ten Commandments, because the voice of God was divided into seven voices, and then went into seventy tongues so that all heard the law in their own language. Since the event recorded in Acts was experienced by Jews who were familiar with this rabbinic tradition, it seems likely that they understood the event as a parallel to the experience of Sinai. In other words, as well as being a reversal of Babel, Pentecost was a continuation of Sinai, a type of the antetype, a fulfillment which “exploded” Sinai beyond all expectations. However, although God went beyond all expectations, out of control, Pentecost is still “controlled” by christology. As Peter said, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21).

The interpretations of the narrative of tongues are legion: (1) the narrative consists of a combination of two sources, one referring to glossolalia, the other to a language miracle (Spitta, 1891); (2) the narrative reflects the rabbinic tradition of the giving of the law, cited above (Knopf, 1916); (3) the narrative reflects an alteration of an event which was originally glossolalic to one which included a language miracle (Holtzmann, Weizsacker, et al.); (4) the narrative refers to a hearing miracle (Goethe); (5) it was simply a glossolalic event, not the gift of unlearned languages (Herder, 1794); (6) the narrative is a myth (F. C. Bauer, 1892); (7) it was a language miracle which should be let to stand as it is, a non-repeatable event like the virgin birth (Krodel, 1986). Whatever interpretation one selects, the point is that ultimately the whole earth hears the Word of the Lord without prior conditions of race or nationality. A minor puzzle is the inclusion of Judea in the list of hearers, as one

would assume Judeans would understand Peter’s speech without recourse to a miracle.

John 20:19-23 (the gospel reading) is the commission to the disciples (the office of the keys); it combines themes of Pentecost and Easter, with reminiscences of the high priestly prayer. The assembly of the disciples behind closed doors on Sunday eve gives occasion for the miraculous appearance of Jesus (v. 19). The peace Jesus gives is a repetition of John 14:27, and this post-resurrection event opens the disciples’ eyes to what they had earlier received. It is also a

reminder that he would not leave them comfortless. The resurrected one legitimizes himself by indicating he is identical with the crucified one by showing his hands and side (v. 20). There is further fulfillment of the farewell discourse when the disciples are glad (v. 20), and Jesus gives them the Spirit, thus coalescing Easter and Pentecost (or anticipating Pentecost?). As in Acts 2, we find here prophecy being fulfilled, not only the prophecy of Joel 2 but also that of Jesus' farewell discourse. The giving of the Spirit was for a purpose: binding and loosing sins. The authority for this activity comes from God through Jesus. On the surface, it appears that this commission to bind or loose sins introduces a new and unique element into the lessons for the day, as there is no hint of such activity in either Joel 2 or Acts 2 (unless one so interprets "saved" in Acts 2:21). Yet it may be understood as further expanding the Pentecost event by giving a purpose for the sending of the Spirit, i.e., not only to prophesy and dream, but also to forgive. When one considers the prominence of the law in the Sinaitic tradition, it makes sense to include the dimension of forgiveness as a further "explosion" of the law and the promise. Also, the gospel reading not only brings together Easter with Pentecost, but it associates Jesus with the Spirit, a fulfillment of John 16:7. Pentecost can only be understood christologically.

## II. THE CONTEXTS

Several themes present themselves as possibilities for homiletical exposition, all of them under the general heading of Day of the Lord, understood both in terms of judgment and promise.

1. The context of the promise in Joel is the judgment of the nations, which at first includes Israel. God calls for repentance ("Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble"—2:1). Then the Lord "had pity on his people" (2:18) and promised them his Spirit. Israel was chosen by God from among the nations to be a witness to righteousness. The text may be read today as referring to the people of God in the midst of the unrighteous. The Spirit of God came to Israel for a purpose, to be a revelation of Yahweh to the nations; Christians, understanding themselves as God's "chosen people" (1 Peter 2:9), interpret this as referring to the church within an unrighteous society or culture. To be sure, God's promise is for "all flesh," and in Acts 2 for all nations, but not without repentance. Homiletically, one can find ample evidence of unrighteousness in our culture today, as well as within the church. Yet like Israel, the church is to be in the world—though not of it—a "peculiar people." The point is not simply to engage in culture-bashing (materialism, greed, self-indulgence), the ills of which also affect the church, but rather to see the giving of the Spirit enabling Christians to be a leaven and a light, so that all nations may return to the Lord. This is both second and third articles material—the Spirit calls by the gospel. We have received the Spirit, but now what shall we do?

2. The most obvious theme is that of the universal scope of the gospel, exemplified by the miracle of Acts 2 and the "all flesh" of Joel 2. It is only by hearing the Word—hearing "in our own tongues the mighty works of God"—that conversion takes place (Rom 10:14-15). But the message is about the risen Jesus Christ, not merely about a vague divine goodwill. "Whoever calls on the name of Jesus Christ will be saved," says Peter; but shortly after announcing this news, he says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The gift of the Spirit is associated with repentance.

Together with the universal scope of the gospel we find the theme of its inclusivity, both

in the listing of the nations and in the breakdown of the barriers of class, gender, and age. The Day of the Lord therefore has to do with unity, the end of divisions, including divisions within the Body of Christ. To bring about such a unity, the Spirit offers renewal, or a re-creation. It is not sufficient that one has been converted once-upon-a-time; the Spirit also “keeps (the church) with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (Luther). Therefore the church is not only a witness to the unrighteous but to the people of God as well: “in which Christian Church he daily and richly forgives all sins.” Luther continues with the eschatological conviction that it will be the Spirit who will raise up the dead and give unto all believers eternal life.

3. The Johannine emphasis on the office of the keys is one that may seldom be heard on Pentecost, but it is the central idea in the gospel reading. This can perhaps be associated with the day’s original Jewish focus on the giving of the law as well as with Peter’s admonition to his hearers to repent. Whereas earlier in the Gospel (John 15 and 16) Jesus speaks more in terms of martyrdom and witness as the apostles’ task, now, in the Pentecost pericope, he is for the first time specific about binding and loosing sins. The concept of “binding” one in sin has largely been dropped from modern thinking and liturgies. The Lutheran *Service Book and Hymnal* referred to the “impenitent and unbelieving” (p. 252), but that has been omitted from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. God’s grace is not a matter of mere tolerance; it is associated with the giving of the law, i.e., the festival of Pentecost. The forgiveness of sins, which is the heart of the gospel, is here clearly associated with the Holy Spirit; it is his gift, as he “daily and richly forgives all sins.” The gift of public absolution is given to the church and is not the private possession of any individual, although individual Christians are encouraged to forgive those who sin against them. Surely contemporary society is in need of a discussion of sin. The recent and exhaustive study of Minnesota churchgoers (J. Chittester and M. Marty, *Faith and Ferment* [Minneapolis: Augsburg; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983]) indicates that 52% of the respondents said they were not sinners. There is no reason to believe this attitude is unique to Minnesota. If Pentecost is about repentance and the reception of the Spirit, and if the Savior came to save us from our sins, it is clear that many churchgoers find no need either for the Spirit or a Savior. Among other cultural forces at work in this denial is some New Age thinking which categorically denies sin or the reality of evil. Pentecost may be an occasion to address this heresy, pointing to the Day of the Lord as the true “New Age”—the Lord through whose Spirit we are renewed through repentance and the Spirit’s gift of forgiveness.