

## ACTS 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, Jesus' followers were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Awed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia; Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we heard them speaking about God's deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean? But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet, Joel:

*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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophecy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone*

*who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

## **CULTIVATING THE SPIRIT**

### **Acts 2:1-21**

“I was absolutely blown away!” Isn’t that the expression we use when we describe a stunning experience that leaves us in amazement and disbelief? According to Luke, the events surrounding the festival of Pentecost following Jesus’ resurrection got everybody’s attention. Listen to the verbs he uses to capture their emotions: “*the crowd gathered and was **bewildered**...**Awed and astonished**, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?... They were **amazed and perplexed**.” Think about it: bewildered, awed, astonished, amazed, perplexed. When was the last time you felt bewildered, awed, astonished, amazed and perplexed all at the same time? Their brains were scrambled having no frame of reference into which to put the events they were witnessing. And they had no other explanation than it all resulted from the effects of high octane wine consumed in the early hours of the morning.*

And it indeed raised a question among all those present—both those who were speaking in different languages and those who could understand the utterances in tongues not their own. It would be like me who speaks English fairly well, but has forgotten nearly all of the Spanish I took in college, comprehending French, Italian, Russian, German and Chinese all at the same time. Yes, I would agree that I would be awed, astonished, bewildered, amazed and perplexed. You would too. Therefore, the question was, as Luke puts it, “*What does this mean?*”

So here we are two millennia later and that same question begs for an answer. What does Pentecost mean for the twenty-first century world? How do we understand it in the context of the political and cultural dynamics that are currently operative among the races and

nationalities of our own time? It is a question worth investigating because it is no secret that hate groups are on the rise; immigration policies are being hotly debated; refugees fleeing the destruction of their homelands are changing the demographics and overwhelming the economies of much of the global community; violence and the increasing threat of nuclear war should be scaring the daylights out of us while at same time the world is ironically more connected through the internet than ever before. How does Pentecost fit into this world?

Let us begin by asking ourselves exactly what was so bewildering, awesome, amazing, astonishing and perplexing. The obvious answer is that it was the tongues of fire, the rushing wind and people conversing in languages not their own. But I see something else beneath the surface. I believe it was the fact that Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and Libya as well as Romans, Jews and Arabs were all in the same room and were totally unified in their proclamation and their mission.

Can you imagine all members of the United Nations unanimously and whole hearted agreeing on a singular proposal? Impossible! We often hate each other, don't we? Many national interests are in direct opposition to each other. We need to build a wall to keep you out. Our leaders regard each other as enemies. We would love to just blow you up! The rifts between us and among us are just so great that it is unimaginable that they could all be bridged.

But that is not God's vision and that is not God's message to the world on Pentecost. God's purpose in Pentecost was and is to cultivate the Spirit among us. By definition, to cultivate is to prepare something for use, to foster growth or to improve by labor and care. Was not God's message to us on that day that though we are different in our cultures, our customs, our belief systems, our skin tones and our histories that we are all rooted in the Spirit and understanding that we are all members of one race—the human race—and therefore essentially members of one family and that we can in fact live together in harmony, respecting the needs of one another without insisting everyone change to be like ourselves and that perhaps the single

greatest thing we share in common is our bottom line need to be loved and accepted?

Why don't we get this? When Edgar Mitchell, one of the Apollo 14 astronauts was returning to earth after walking on the moon, he had some time to look out the window and reflect upon what he was seeing—a beautiful blue and white planet in the midst of a great and shimmering cosmos. And later he wrote that “you develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world and a compulsion to do something about it. From out there on the moon, international politics look so petty. You want to grab a politician by the scruff of the neck and drag him a quarter of a million miles away and say, ‘Look at that, you (S.O.B.)’”

So what was Pentecost if not a celebration of diversity? There was no attempt to pretend that everyone was the same. It was not about sameness. On the contrary, it was about the uniqueness of everyone, each person having not only the right, but the privilege to be exactly who they were. Jews could be Jews, Greeks could be Greeks, Arabs could be Arabs, Egyptians could be Egyptians, men could be men and women could be women. In our Old Testament lesson, Joel exclaimed, *In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...Then everyone (**everyone!**) who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* As poet and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences.”

Juxtapose Lorde's words with those of attorney James Kolenich, a civil rights attorney with a different take on the world. (Mr. Kolenich has gained notoriety for defending the civil rights of white supremacists). He believes white people must save and preserve their civilization from Jews, immigrants and minorities. As quoted in the Enquirer recently, Kolenich said, “My willingness to get involved is to oppose Jewish influence in society. It's plain that white people are the chosen people in the New Testament. It's the *job* we were given, to spread Christianity around the world. That doesn't,” he claims in the same breath, “involve hatred of other races, not even of ethnic Jews. But it does involve the opposing of their un-Christian

influence in society.” Hmm...I wonder how Mr. Kolenich would interpret the Pentecost account... The irony is that if we are faithful to the message of Pentecost, we must not lower ourselves into hating people like him or even pitying him, though those are likely the emotions we are feeling right now. Because we must ask ourselves what we spirit **we** are cultivating. If anything, people who repulse us with their world-views, narcissistic behaviors and hateful agendas should be our inspiration. Yes, our *inspiration*. They should inspire us to put more love into the world, to open our arms wider to all who share this earth with us, to embrace the Oneness that unites us in the Spirit. For I believe the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

It goes beyond tolerance. Who wants to be tolerated? I don't want you to *tolerate* me. I want you to *accept* me. I want you to *respect* me. You really don't have to like me. I can get along without that. But what I want from you is to place my humanity in the same soil as yours so that we can grow in God's garden in parallel rows and offer the fruits of our labors at the harvest to any who wish to use them. That's what I want. And if we can somehow figure out how to do that, we will indeed cultivate the Spirit amongst us and while it may seem bewildering, it will also be awesome, astonishing and amazing!

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