

Peter's First Sermon

I don't remember my first sermon. It was probably delivered during a Sunday evening service at Burlingame Baptist Church in Portland, OR. I did an internship there with the senior pastor, Dr. Duane Dunham. Dr. Dunham was also my Greek prof at seminary.

I preached something out of Ephesians. If memory serves, it was longer than it should have been and burdened with forgettable exegetical details. Dr. Dunham counseled me afterward against pontificating on raising kids when as yet I didn't have any. We were about to graduate from seminary so we were full of answers even though we barely understood the questions.

Preaching is the craft of a lifetime and I was on the very front end of a very long learning curve.

Wouldn't it be something to preach a whiz-bang right out of the blocks?

Peter did that. The day the church was born, the Apostle Peter stood up in front of an inquiring crowd and spoke with such power that three-thousand people trusted Jesus, got baptized and joined the church.

It took place on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. If you were here last week, you remember what happened the morning of Pentecost Sunday. About one-hundred twenty believers were gathered in a large home for a prayer meeting. Suddenly the house was filled with the roar of a powerful wind, but no breeze stirred. Tongues of fire appeared and settled on everyone present, but no one got burned.

Jesus had poured out the Holy Spirit. The sound and the flames were signs of God's presence. Jesus immersed his followers in the Spirit and the church was born. Then, filled with the Spirit, the disciples spilled out into the streets where a large crowd was gathering. People heard the mighty noise and as they rushed to where it came from, they collided with Christ's followers declaring God's praise.

The strange thing was that in the crowd were Jews from all over the known world. They were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. And each of them heard at least one of the disciples speaking in their own native language and dialect. The believers were speaking by the Spirit in foreign tongues they had never learned.

Amazed, the crowd demanded to know: "What does this mean? Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine'" (Acts 2:12-13).

That's when Peter got up to speak. God had made his presence known. The miracle of languages on Pentecost was a sign and Peter stood up to explain what was happening. Turn with me to Acts 2:14-41.

Peter began by disabusing the hecklers: "Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 'Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!'"

And then he got down to serious preaching. We're going to take the time to read his sermon. Luke gives us a synopsis—the *Reader's Digest* condensed version. Peter had a lot more to say than what is recorded here. But we don't miss the impact of his message. Let's read.

Peter answers three questions:

- What does this mean?

- What has God done?
- What must we do?

First, he answers the meaning question. Peter says that what they were experiencing fulfilled a prophecy made by the Hebrew prophet Joel.

We need to hear verses 16-21 as First Century Jews living in Jerusalem; not as Twenty-first Century Christians living in America. From our vantage point, we want to slice and dice Joel's prophecy so we account for every detail and pigeon-hole it in its own category. We want to know about the dreams and prophecies and signs and wonders and what they signify.

Peter ignores our concerns. He wants his audience to understand that this event is something Israel had long anticipated. In the last days, God would pour out his Spirit on everyone: young and old, men and women, slave and free. All would receive the Spirit.

That's what happened at Pentecost. All received the Spirit indiscriminately and equally. All spoke in languages they had not learned. What Joel prophesied was coming to pass.

This signified that God had set in motion "the last days," the final age of humankind. With the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, human history turned to its final course and began moving to its consummation. This is the age of the Spirit.

When these last days draw to an end, the cosmic signs Joel spoke of will come to pass. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John sees seven seals and the judgements they initiate. He writes: "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand'" (Rev. 6:13-17)?

The scene John describes comes at the very end of these last days. The last days began with Jesus' resurrection and God pouring out his Spirit at Pentecost. They end in cosmic, catastrophic judgment. During this time between the times: "...everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."

"What does this mean?" that's what the crowd wanted to know. Peter informed them that hearing God's praises in a miracle of languages fulfills Joel's prophecy. This is God's sign that the last days have been set in motion.

Then Peter addresses a second question: What has God done? Look at verse twenty-two.

First, God had authenticated Jesus by powerful miracles, wonders and signs. There were people in that crowd who had seen Jesus heal the sick and cast out demons. Some of them may have eaten bread and fish from when Jesus multiplied a boy's lunch to feed a crowd of thousands. They knew the remarkable, undeniable stories of what Jesus did. Peter declares that God had been at work through those signs credentialing Jesus as Messiah.

In the outworking of God's sovereign plan and purposes, he delivered Messiah to them. Israel's response was to solicit Roman help in killing Jesus by crucifixion.

That must have been a stunning moment! Can you imagine the impact this accusation had on the crowd: you killed God's man!

Peter moves on. God wasn't done. They killed Jesus but death could not sustain its grip

on Jesus. God raised him from the dead.

Peter appealed to their Hebrew Scriptures to show how God had predicted all this. He directed their attention to passages the Jews had long puzzled over. They didn't quite know what to make of them. First he quotes from Psalm 16:8-11.

David wrote what could not possibly apply to himself. He died a thousand years before, and his body decayed. His tomb was still visible in Jerusalem. Peter declares that when David wrote these words, he spoke a prophecy concerning one of his descendants, the Messiah who would one day inherit David's throne.

Look at verses 31-33. God raised Jesus, fulfilling David's prophecy. And God gave Jesus the authority to pour out his Spirit, further fulfilling God's promises.

What's more, God gave Jesus imperial authority over the universe, enthroning him at his right hand—v. 34-35.

Peter quotes from Psalm 110. Jesus also used this same passage and referred it to himself. The best scholars in Israel couldn't refute him. The words from the Psalm describe what God would do for Messiah, whom David calls my *Adonai*—my Lord.

Then Peter boldly drives the point home: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

What has God done? You killed God's Messiah, but God raised him from the dead. We're eye witnesses to his resurrection. And God has exalted Jesus, this man you rejected and crucified, and made him Lord of all, Israel's true Messiah.

The words found their target. The Holy Spirit not only gave Peter incredible power and boldness, he also did his convicting work in the hearts of the crowd—v. 37.

"What shall we do?" The question is wrung from their hearts by the realization of what they had done. How can we escape what we deserve for rejecting and killing God's Messiah?

Peter was ready with his answer: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the *forgiveness* of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Once again we have to resist our determination to bring our Twenty-First Century scientific analysis to bear on this verse. We want to do theology, dissecting the verse to determine the exact relationship and sequence between repentance, baptism, forgiveness and receiving the Spirit.

Do you think anyone in that crowd worried about theological precision? It was the furthest thing from Peter's mind. Jesus told his apostles to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name. That's what Peter is doing. His audience needed to repent. That's the first step faith takes. They needed to change their minds about Jesus. He was not a blasphemous pretender worthy of death. He is in fact both Lord and Messiah. That internal shift needed to go clear to the bone. It required a complete reorientation of their hearts toward Jesus and confession of their sins to God.

The step of baptism was an outward sign to their world that they believed the truth about Jesus and had genuinely repented of their rebellion and rejection. Baptism in water was symbolic of washing—soul cleansing—indicating their belief that through Jesus, God had forgiven their sins and made them clean.

Peter saw all of these decisions and acts comprehensively, all part of the turn-around of a soul that comes to God through faith in Jesus. Such as these also receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Look at v. 40-41. "With many other words..." That's how we know Peter was a preacher.

We're getting the edited version of his sermon. He warned them of the consequences of continued unbelief and begged them to save themselves out of a corrupt generation.

And three-thousand people responded in faith. They had a monster baptismal service and the church grew to be twenty-five times larger than it had been when that morning dawned.

Not bad for a first sermon.

As I read this, what leaps to my mind is this: What if that happened here? How did they absorb so many new believers? What would we do if God dropped three-thousand people into our laps? Do you think we might rearrange our schedules, programs and priorities to absorb them?

What if it was only three hundred? We would effectively double in size. Would we be willing and able to re-arrange everything we do in order to help these new believers follow Jesus?

What if it was only thirty? Or three?

This challenges us to think beyond ourselves; beyond business as usual—maintaining a comfortable church that exists for our personal spiritual needs and desires. We're a church for the world. We're a church for our city! How ready are we for God to bring baby believers into our church family?

Babies are messy. They upset our rhythms and comfort zones, and wear us out to the point of exhaustion. But we love them for the new life they represent. Are we ready to absorb God's newly adopted kids?

And, there is a challenge for those whose thinking about Jesus may be unfocused—those who have not yet made the life-altering decision to follow Jesus. If Peter is right and Scripture is true, God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ. If that's true, Jesus is the one person we dare not ignore!

Through the Prophet Isaiah, God said: "By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.' All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame. But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult" (Isaiah 45:23-25).

The Apostle Paul paraphrased this very thought in his letter to the Philippians: "God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11).

Someday every one of us will stand before Jesus and acknowledge him to be both Lord and Christ. *You* will bow and make this confession. Some—those who have rejected Jesus as Lord in this life—will make that declaration against their will. Isaiah says they will be put to shame and suffer eternal loss.

For those who follow Jesus now, however, that moment will be one of unutterable, indescribable joy and worship.

God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ. He calls us to repent of our waywardness—our refusal to acknowledge Jesus—and to save ourselves from this corrupt generation. You must come to terms with the claims of Jesus. Your life now and all of your eternity hangs in the balance.

What must we do? "Repent and be baptized every one of you for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."