

“A sermon that changed the world”

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

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Our scripture this morning follows a well-known section in the book of Acts --- that part of the book of Acts that describes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is often referred to as the birthday of the church. Scripture tells us people from all over the world *simultaneously* heard speech in their *own native language*. Here we pick up on part of Peter’s address to the assembled crowd. Peter begins to explain what is happening in what has been called the first sermon of the church. He explains the prophecies as they are fulfilled in Christ, citing the prophet Joel, King David, and Psalm 110. We continue our reading as Peter wraps up his great sermon with an astonishing altar call.

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. Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

I wasn’t even supposed *to be here*. I wouldn’t have made the long trip if my father had not gotten so sick. Even though I was only thirteen, my father said I was already a man. I had to be the ‘man of the house,’ he said, and accompany my mother and older sisters to the Holy City for the feast of Shavuot¹. Abba stayed back with my Bubeleh. Even though we were worried about him, he waved us out the door and insisted we leave. “Go, go, get on the road! You don’t want to miss the feast!”

It had been a good harvest for us. We were thankful. Things had been going well on our farm this year; the rains had been just enough, at just the right time. It was the best crop of grapes we’d had since I was a little kid. And we were going to the temple to offer thanks---to bring the first fruits of our harvest.

¹ The Jewish Feast of Weeks, falling at Pentecost.

But Shavuot was much more than a celebration of our blessings. As my mother Miriam was so quick to point out, “Benjamin, remember the ten words”. She must have said it *ten thousand times* if she had said it once. Shavuot is a holy time for us. We remember how God gave us the law on Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai we truly knew we were God’s people, no longer slaves. It was the ten words that changed our entire history. I knew it. I had been through the study of Torah. And my parents made sure I would never forget.

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery from the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.” And on it went.

It was my first trip to Jerusalem and I was excited to see all the new sights and sounds. I couldn’t believe the size of the massive towers on the edge of the city. Herod had built them not too long ago. They were huge! And there was the palace, which we couldn’t get too close to. It towered high above the rest of the buildings. But I was most excited to see the Temple, which Herod had begun to rebuild. I heard it was already quite a sight to be seen. I would be finished in gold and white, gleaming in the sun.

I was unprepared for the crowds. I couldn’t believe how many people were on the road. The closer we got to Jerusalem, the more people packed into the narrow way leading to the city. And the sounds! It was noisy! People speaking languages I’d never heard, **many** different languages, not just one or two. As we entered the city gates it was almost like a buzzing. You could pick out a word here or there, but mostly, it was confusing and disorienting.

I asked my mother why people were speaking so many languages. She told me Jews had been living in far off places for centuries, ever since our ancestors were taken captive in Babylon. During certain high festivals, like Shavuot, Jews travelled for weeks to get to Jerusalem and to pay their respects. So we were gathering along with people from Egypt, Syria, Pergamum, Parthia, Cappadocia, even as far away at Greece and Rome. It was mind boggling. And I thought **we** had come a long way.

Mother began to fuss at me as the crowds grew thicker. I didn’t feel too much like the “man of the house”. I felt like a kid. Or more like a calf being herded.

After getting our bearings, we settled in at our cousin’s house. Our hosts were excited and talkative. Mother was eager to hear all the news of the family and the city. There was a lot to catch up on since she and Abba had last visited here.

The biggest news of the day was so incredible I couldn't believe my ears. Not too long ago a man named Jesus, whom many thought was the Messiah, was crucified by the Romans. But here is the incredible part. His followers were saying he had risen from the dead. He had actually been seen! By more than one person! I didn't believe it. Couldn't possibly be true.

But our cousins said a gathering of his followers had come to town just yesterday. "We thought there might be trouble", they said. But then, the most amazing thing happened. A crowd of people, people from all over the world, came together and HEARD these guys talking, each one in their own language!

"It was just down the street," my cousin said. "I was there myself. I know for a fact some of the people who were there heard the same thing I did, and I know they don't speak Aramaic. I know because one man we talked to translated."

"No way that could have happened. Not possible!" I said.

"Well, their leader is said to be out there right now, this very afternoon, talking about everything that's happened."

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!" I jumped up, feeling more like a man than I had just a few short hours ago.

I could see the look of protest on my mother's face, but I flew out the door anyway, quick on the heels of my cousin, who seemed to know exactly where to go.

And there we were, in the middle of a crowd gathered around this man who spoke with such authority. He almost seemed to glow. He spoke of the prophets, and of David, and our own book of Psalms. He spoke with such conviction. It made me *want* to listen.

I don't know if it was all the strange people, or being in the Holy City, or the festival, but there was a feeling in the air. A feeling of something about to happen, something about to break loose. I ought to have been scared, looking back on it, but somehow I wasn't. I felt it was right for me to be there. And he was talking to me, a Jew, in ways I could understand. I was glad I had been made to study the Holy book.

Not that I would have ever told my mother that!

This man, they said his name was Peter, claimed that Jesus was God, Lord and Messiah. And he said **we** crucified him, not the Romans.

It bothered me, to be grouped with people who would torture a man. It bothered other people, too. People around me looked scared and bewildered. Almost like they had that sinking feeling they had actually done something horrible that could never be undone.

What if he really was God's Son? And we killed him, like a common criminal? I know my mother would be disturbed to hear my thoughts. I didn't want to imagine what my father would think. I was glad they weren't with me.

People all around me began to murmur. They asked Peter and his disciples, "What can we possibly do? We cannot undo this. It is too terrible."

"Repent," he said. "Turn back to God. Change your mind about the way you've been headed. Turn in your old beliefs for new ones."

"Be baptized in the name of Jesus and he will forgive you." He went on, "A while back John the Baptist baptized with water. He prepared the way for Jesus, who baptizes not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. No matter what you've done, no matter how unforgiveable you think you are, he is waiting to forgive you."

"Now this promise of the Holy Spirit is for everyone. It's not just for our close friends, it's not just for Jews, it's not just for people in Jerusalem. **Everyone** is invited to be saved by the power of God's spirit. It is a gift."

"And remember, set yourself apart from this corrupt world. Don't be fooled into thinking the world can give you what only God can provide. Say 'no' to the world so you can say 'yes' to God."

Looking back on that day, how could I have known the importance of it? How could I have ever known how many people would be affected by his message, how many things got started, how widely Peter's message would be sent? Who could have imagined people would be still reading his sermon centuries into the future?

I only know that something inside me was forever changed that day. I didn't know how, or even why. All I could think about was how could I face my parents again. I wondered if *they* would ever forgive me.

Three thousand people were baptized that day. I was one of them.