

FROM PENTECOST TO MEMORIAL

Acts 2

The introductory essay to the “1619 Project” won the Pulitzer Prize in 2020. “1619” is an attempt to reframe US based on the institution of slavery. It has certainly stirred up a lot of controversy among politicians and school boards. Whether you agree with “1619” or not, it does reflect the rethinking of history which has become so prominent since the War in Vietnam.

The word “propaganda” is historically linked to what came out of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. The idea is that if you keep showing claims among people, they will eventually believe it no matter how false those claims are. Claims made historically in US history are now seen as false, such as those who defended slavery or the principle of “separate, but equal” between races. Were the founding fathers just concerned with freedom and equality or were they more concerned about the loss of money to taxes? How do we justify the country’s role in the Mexican War?

In that desire to correct falsehoods many are attacking what we have believed about our faith. Besides the most well known about the six day creation are all miracles noted in the Bible. Since we do not see regular evidence of those things today, it is easy to conclude that people who were healed in the Bible had psychosomatic illnesses, that events like the Nile turning red as the first plague Moses warned about was caused by some natural event like red clay polluting the river, and Easter was just a vision seen by some people. So is the Bible outdated? Are we really wasting our time here when we could at least be sleeping in?

The story of Pentecost is usually called the starting point of the Church. We use the red color as a reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit who moved the disciples to boldly proclaim the Gospel. We read that thousands turned to Jesus after Peter’s sermon that day. Pentecost is seen as the way we need to be. If we would be “as on fire” as the disciples were that day, then people would be coming in droves to the Church.

But that misses the real impact of Pentecost. Pentecost shows us that God is the one making things happen, God is in control. Pentecost cannot be separated from what happened before it—the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter in his sermon right away points the people to the prophecy of the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.’

The Spirit appeared with the sound of wind, the tongues of fire on the disciples', and with the disciples speaking in other languages, not so much to fire them up, but to fulfill the prophecy. "The signs and wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below" were seen around 50 days before when God darkened the sky, ripped the curtain of the temple, and raised dead people from their graves on the day Jesus died. Many of the same people in Jerusalem for Pentecost had been there just 50 days earlier for Passover when Jesus died and rose.

We may have the impression that the disciples sat around in a room and cowered with fear until the Holy Spirit moved them on Pentecost. Certainly the disciples were locked up in fear on Easter night. But as Jesus appeared and taught them the Scripture in light of His resurrection, they did want to share the message. They stayed together in Jerusalem not out of fear, but because Jesus told them to wait until the Spirit came.

After Jesus ascended into heaven Luke says of the disciples, "Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God." The "room" that the disciples were in on Pentecost, was not some house in which they were hiding. They were in the temple where people could see them. The gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was not so much to motivate them to share the Gospel, but to fulfill the Scripture, to show people "This is God's doing! This is His will!"

When we hear the stories of Peter and Paul and others hearing the Gospel we can easily feel that it was great they did it, but how can we? They were these great giants of faith so fired up by the Holy Spirit. The word "Spirit" comes from the same word as "breath" or "air." Think of a tire. It is no good if it isn't pumped up with air. So how can we share the Gospel unless we are "pumped up" by the Holy Spirit?

But what we are missing is what the Holy Spirit was really doing on Pentecost. Pentecost is part of the whole story of salvation which began even before there was a world. It is the story of how God loved us despite our rebellion against Him and prepared the way for a Savior to come. It is how God became one of us in Jesus and lived the life we failed to live. It is how He suffered and died to take the punishment we deserve. It is how He rose on Easter to defeat death. And it is also how He fulfills His Word in the coming of the Holy Spirit who does "pump us up" with the gift of faith in Jesus. Pentecost is not gaining some special power within us, but about the certainty of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

That Pentecost goes on. The Holy Spirit continues to bring faith into the hearts of people. With fewer and fewer people going to church and the resulting closing of many churches it can seem as though the Holy Spirit has gone AWOL.

For years scientists believed that our universe began with a big bang. They knew from looking at the stars that the universe was expanding, but assumed that the expansion began with the big bang and continues, though it is gradually slowing down. But in recent years evidence points to the expansion accelerating, not slowing down.

From our perspective it may appear that God is “slowing down,” not having the impact on our world when more people in our culture went to church and followed what were believed to be Christian customs. But we are looking from our view, not God’s. We can look back and see how God has blessed this congregation with students who have gone on from here to bless others. But it is so hard to see what is happening now, much less in the future.

That’s where Pentecost as part of the story of salvation fits in. Jesus promised His disciples in the beginning of the book of Acts, “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Those words come true during the course of the book. What God promises, God does. He promises that the Gospel will continue to be spread and continue to change lives until the world comes to an end. Pentecost helps us to see that, to trust that God is with us now, sending the Holy Spirit to change lives just as He has here for over 80 years.