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But God Raised Him Up

MARK LOVE

This sermon was a theme lecture at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures in May 2010. I began the sermon by reciting Acts 2 in its entirety. I wanted the entire chapter in play in a dramatic way, particularly because some of the passages are so familiar to us, while others are somewhat obscured in comparison. I highlighted this in the presentation by pretending to forget the words of verse 38, the words most familiar to a Church of Christ audience. It took the listeners a minute to figure out what I was doing, but they soon showed their appreciation of this omission with laughter. A woman seated on the front row finally helped me by yelling out “Repent!” Some of what follows refers to that moment.

THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD

What a great text! This is, after all, “**our**” text. It’s the text that we list on the birth certificate of Churches of Christ. It says on the cornerstones of some of our buildings, “This building erected 1954, this church established 33 A.D.” It’s our text. We are, proudly, and for good reason, Acts 2 Christians.

I saw you mouthing the words when we got to verse 38. “‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized’” . . . and some other stuff . . . “and **three thousand** were added that day to the church.” Doesn’t that make you want more? Doesn’t it create some longing to see another day like that? Gotta get me some Pentecost!

After all, this is the great and glorious day of the Lord. Make no mistake about it, that’s what this day is all about. These men aren’t drunk. This is God’s word through the prophet Joel come to life. This is the great and glorious day of the Lord. The pouring out of power from on high—the same power that raised Jesus from the dead—is now poured out on sons and daughters, young and old, and even on slaves, both male and female. And it all comes with a new dispensation of speech. This is the day when the gospel becomes the universal language of the whole world, when everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And this day has lived in the hearts of some for a long time. It has lived in their hearts like an ache. Like a key change. Like a flower in the dead of winter.

It lived in people like Simeon (remember him in Luke chapter 2?), whose old, watery eyes were looking for the consolation of Israel. It was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would see God’s anointed one—the one who would end their long humiliation at the hands of other powers, and bring Israel back to the center of God’s redemptive purposes for all nations. Listen to him. You can hear the weight of his longing, “My eyes have seen your salvation, . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2.30–32).

It also lived in Anna, Simeon’s counterpart in Luke’s Gospel. A prophet, Luke calls her, of great age, living in the temple, praising God and preaching to anyone who will listen about the redemption of Jerusalem. Eighty-four years of anticipation for the day when Jerusalem would rise above every hill and become the mountain of the Lord’s instruction for the nations. Her eyes creased with the wrinkles of a life spent fasting and praying night and day out of a hunger to sing with full throat, “Zion, O glorious Zion!”

There has been a longing for this day in people like these, people like Simeon and Anna, who are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are living, breathing billboards for the future, forerunners of Pentecost, a prophesying son and daughter, harbingers of a new day, and desire is set deep in their hearts for more. They long for more—for a new day bursting with all the promise of God.

Gotta get me some Pentecost!

GOD, THE HERO OF THE STORY

In case you've missed it to this point, God is the hero of this story. Not Peter, not Paul, not the church. God.

God raised Israel's Messiah from the dead, and Acts 2 rests fully on this reality. Make no mistake about it. Be assured of this. This that you see and hear is the work of God, the result of raising this Jesus from the dead, seating him at the right hand of God in glory and handing over to him the kingdom. God has made Israel's Messiah Lord of all, giving him the authority to pour out the Spirit, which is the effective power of the kingdom of God.

This that you see and hear is God keeping his promise to Abraham—that through Abraham all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And here they are, Parthians, Medes and Elamites. Oh my! This has happened in the presence of devout Jews—devout Israelites from every nation under heaven. God has placed devout Jews, people like Simeon and Anna, in every corner of the globe so that through Israel and the announcement of Israel's Messiah raised from the dead, every nation on earth will be blessed.

This that you see and hear is God guaranteeing the world's future through *Israel's* Messiah. The story of God's promise keeping travels through Jesus Messiah, who pours the Spirit out on the Twelve, on Peter and James and John—and Matthias, the freshly minted apostle, completer of the Twelve, the newest representative of the new Israel.

And it happens, not in Rome, not in Alexandria, but in Zion, David's city, God's holy mountain, the highest of all hills from which all might receive the instruction of the Lord.

This is God. It is God keeping this improbable story alive. This is God keeping faithfulness, breathing life into a story left for dead, raising it up, bringing it back to life, time and time again. This is muscle and ligament and flesh and breath for dry bones.

And this is God acting in a decisive way, in a once-for-all way, in a way that leaves no doubt. God acts in Israel's worst moment when God's anointed, the one attested by God through deeds, signs and wonders, is put to death. In this lowest moment, God's greatest affirmation appears. He raises Israel's Messiah from the dead and enthrones him forever, securing once and for all Israel's central role in the promise of God for all the world. Once and for all consoling Israel, redeeming Jerusalem, and through this, saving all nations.

This is the day that Simeon and Anna longed for. It is a line drawn by the Holy Spirit directly from their hearts to Pentecost. This is God's emphatic "yes" to all human longing for more, for a fuller, poured out, extravagant mercy, for life without the threat of death, for the great and glorious day of the Lord.

Can I get a witness?!

GOD GIVES US THE SLIP

"Brothers, what shall we do?"

Let me just say that this question doesn't come about the way you think. Not usually. You don't wake up one morning, roll out of bed and while reading the paper between sips of your morning coffee think to yourself, "I think I'll oppose the work of God in the world today."

That's not the way it happens. In fact, it's usually something quite the opposite. It starts often times with a word like "devout"—with a passion for the things of God. It doesn't happen out there somewhere, not all the time at least—not among the pew warmers in the synagogue, the ones who have more passion for their fantasy baseball team than whatever it is that's going on in Jerusalem. This isn't typically the result of apathy or neglect.

It's just the opposite. It's the devout. Those who would use a week's vacation, not to run off to Vegas or Caesarea-Philippi for the slots, but rather those who take vacation time for the festivals in Jerusalem. Who mark their daily planners and know when and where they will be able to hear their favorite speakers in Solomon's portico or near the Pool of Siloam or in Stauffer Chapel.

It's crazy, I know, but this is how it happens. Grave dissatisfaction with what's going on out there in the world. The temple's corrupt. The occupying powers are not friendly to true religion. They go along just enough to water it all down. Something has to be done. So you start a "back to the scroll" movement.

This is sometimes how it happens. It begins with a string of good things. It manifests itself through devotion—through greater focus and performance that distinguishes us from others who don't take this thing quite as seriously. And it becomes its own thing. It takes on a life of its own, and then it has to be fed and watered. So we write books, and we identify a right wing and a left wing, conservatives and progressives, and we have conferences, so that we'll know where we belong in relationship to this thing.

And we pack up the fifth wheel and head to Passover, because this is the thing, the thing that ties us to God. And it never occurs to us that God has given us the slip. Not while we're waiting for the shuttle or sharing a piece of pie or saving a place for a friend so that we can hear the latest chant team. It never occurs to us that in the middle of all this devotion there might be a loud commotion and the morning speaker at a 9:00 a.m. impromptu session, the one not in the daily planner, accuses us: "This one God attested to through deeds and signs and wonders. This one handed over to you. This one you crucified and killed at the hands of those outside the law."

Talk about your unintended consequences. It never occurred to us. It simply never occurred to us that somehow as God is making the world bigger, we're making it smaller. That somehow, the very thing we hoped for is the very thing we're opposing. That somehow, it is possible to get tangled up in good things so that you miss the one thing.

We never, ever thought we'd hear, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

It's just not the way it happens. "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Uncanny, isn't it, how much going to Passover in Jerusalem sounds like attending the Pepperdine Lectures? It's probably just a coincidence. I wouldn't worry about it. It's not like some preacher is going to get up today and show us we've been on the wrong side of this thing. I wouldn't worry about it.

Except. Well, just this one thing. It's probably not a big thing.

But—and I don't want to talk out of school here—in some corners we are not really known as a group who has warmly received the Holy Spirit. Still, I doubt it's possible that a preacher could get up this week and say, "This Spirit, that I poured out on you, you ignored." No one's going to say, "Let the Church of Christ be assured of this, this Spirit without which there is no church bearing the name of Christ, this Spirit you kept on the down-low." What preacher would get up and say this week, "This Spirit, sent to you by God to perform signs and wonders in your midst, you gave the cold shoulder, locked him up in the Bible, made him a prisoner of the past."

I'm sure there's nothing for us to worry about. So, let's go back to the sermon.

MISSION AND THE PROPHETIC SPIRIT

I hope you brought your Dramamine this week, because this story is going somewhere. By the end of the week, we've got to get this thing past Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, all the way to the ends of the earth.

And there might well be turbulence because according to Acts 2, we're riding a violent wind. There might be beatings and imprisonments, riots and persecutions, houses shaken and earthquakes. And all this shaking might very well turn our pockets inside out and find us scrambling to again hide some good old-fashioned bigotry, greed and self-promotion. This could get choppy.

But the wind will not wait for us to get our act together. We've got places to go. God has visited

Jerusalem, not for Jerusalem's sake alone, but for the sake of the entire world, so that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. This story is not only for you and your children, but also for those who are far away. We've gathered Phrygians and Pamphyliaans, Ghanaians and Croatians, Americans and Texans, just to make sure this goes all the way to the edges of the earth. Because this, friends, is what God is up to—going to the edges of the earth. So, let's take our Dramamine, because let's face it, this story will go only so far as the Spirit blows it.

It will take the Spirit blowing us because we're not built naturally for boundary crossings. We're nesters. We like accomplishments, not unfinished stories. We want measurable forecasts and outcomes. It doesn't feel like strong leadership for us to wait for power from on high, or to say we're going wherever the wind takes us.

And we clump together in groups of people mostly like us, which makes us less mobile, harder to get off the ground. And we like our stuff, and our stuff needs space. And space inhibits our ability to jump the tracks and go places. It will take a Holy Spirit, a violent wind, to get us to the ends of the earth.

This means we will need prophets.

In my reading of Acts 2, mission and the spirit of prophecy go together. "Poured out" and "the ends of the earth" go together. They're tied together by the word "more." Both require an ability to cross horizons, to imagine a world not yet fully in view.

The prophetic spirit allows us to see the movement of God in a world of disorienting details. It's the prophetic spirit that allows us to speak of God in an upside down world. The prophetic spirit keeps us looking and longing. It grounds our lives in hope. It takes a prophetic spirit to see through the things to which we are devoted to keep our eyes on the work of God in the world.

YOUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY

Your young men will have visions.

I get about a phone call a week from my twenty-four-year-old son, Josh. He wants more. He currently lives with three other guys on Cockrell Street in Abilene, Texas. And let's just say that this is not the street realtors show people in Abilene. There, they have written a rule of life, a way to live with each other that honors God and allows them to freely serve their neighbors. And part of that rule is the practice of material simplicity. And part of that practice is sharing one bank account. All of their money in a single purse, and they decide how to spend it together. They do some amazing things. Not long ago they wiped it all out to send it to earthquake victims in Haiti. They sent all of it.

So, Nancy and I are starting a support group for parents of new monastics. It all seems so wildly impractical. And it doesn't come with health insurance. I didn't teach him this way. I taught him to feed a mortgage and fund your retirement—to move up the ladder. But he wanted more than that.

My friend Tyler reads Acts 2 and says: "I, along with many other fellow twenty-somethings, want to experience the life of the resurrected Pentecost community for ourselves. More than charismatic experiences, we desire to participate in and embody verses 42–47. We are not so much looking for a spiritual high but a way of life. This is what stirs a longing within me, and many others of my generation."

And your daughters shall prophesy.

I don't know how else to talk about this today. So, here it is. I don't know how it is that we think we're so fixed for gifts that we can afford to ignore what is given by the Spirit for God's work in the world on the basis of gender. Either we're so naive about what participation in the mission of God requires, or we are so wildly optimistic about our own capacities, that we can afford to turn up our noses at the good gifts God offers through his daughters.

My friend Naomi just received her MDiv. She clearly has gifts given by God, public gifts, and she has prepared herself to serve the church for the sake of the world. She wonders: "How much different might our

churches be if we were able to hear God in male and female voices? If our churches allowed God to speak to us in the humanity of different genders? If it were not strange to hear a woman speak for God?"

My friend Kasey, who bears amazing gifts, reads Acts 2 and wonders: "The people are pierced to the heart and Peter tells them that if they are baptized they will receive the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that enabled everyone to hear God in their own tongue, the same Holy Spirit that is poured out on all people. This is what happens when we are baptized. So I can't help but wonder: "Wasn't I baptized? Didn't I receive the Holy Spirit? Can't I speak for God? It seems like the early church sure thought so . . . I long for a day when our churches make room for the Holy Spirit (it's in our chapter, after all), if not for me, then maybe for my sons and daughters."

Look, I know this is a hard issue to work out in our churches. There are questions that we could ask of scripture concerning the use of gifts of women in our churches and come back with the answer "no." But they aren't the questions of Pentecost. They're not questions rooted in mission, or in the reality of the Holy Spirit, or in God's final purposes for all creation.

A church in mission, in God's mission, a church orienting to the ends of the earth, riding on the wind of the Spirit, does not have the luxury of having "no" as the default answer to the question of gifts, any gifts.

Josh and Tyler, Naomi and Kasey read this text with different eyes than we do. They read with Simeon and Anna's eyes. They long for more.

I worry about this, because we don't do well nurturing the prophetic spirit. These people don't easily find places within our congregations. My fear here is that this failure is due, in part, because we have attached ourselves to Acts 2 in the wrong place. We have aligned ourselves to this text in such a way that we ended up resisting the very thing we longed for. We have latched onto this text where it talks about what we do, and we have missed those places that say what God is doing for the sake of his great and glorious day.

"Brothers what shall we do?"

Know this with certainty, the promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are far away.

"But this is not what we intended."

Do not despair. Upon those who believe this message, God will pour out his Holy Spirit.

We have found ourselves on the wrong side of this text."

If you have, you have found yourselves in one of the most wonderful places of grace in all of scripture. This Jesus, you crucified. But God has raised him up! Receive the Holy Spirit.

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