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# All Flesh: Acts 2.17–21

TRAVIS STANLEY

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*Travis Stanley originally preached a version of this sermon on April 13, 2008, as his congregation was preparing to celebrate Pentecost. The sermon was inspired by the first quarter 2008 issue of Leaven, Your Sons and Your Daughters Shall Prophesy, particularly D'Esta Love's sermon, "Does All Flesh Mean Me?"*

**L**ong before the world of Acts and the first century church, over five hundred years before the day of Pentecost, there was a prophet named Joel. Joel, the son of Pethuel, was called by God to deliver to the people of Judah a word of judgment and call to repentance.

Like a plague of locusts, the army of God is coming. You have too long turned your backs on God. You have too long committed injustice against your neighbor. Repent.

*Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests;  
wail, you ministers . . . (Joel 1.13a)  
Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children . . . (Joel 2.15–16a)  
Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.  
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations." (Joel 2.17)*

It is not, however, all doom and gloom for the prophet Joel. Like most prophets, Joel follows up his message of judgment with a word of hope, hope that if the people hear these words and repent, the Lord will relent his anger, forgive them, and make a new world possible.

Hear these words from the prophet Joel:

*Then afterward  
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,*

*and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2.28–29)*

With eyes that could only belong to a prophet, Joel sees behind the curtain of our unjust, segregated, hate-filled world, and imagines the world as it would look through God's eyes. It is a beautiful world, a world overflowing with God's spirit, which falls on all flesh equally, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity or social standing.

Five hundred years later, the disciples and Jews from all over the world gather together in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost. Jesus has ascended into heaven, and his followers have gathered this day of Pentecost, as he commanded them to do, in an upper room, waiting and praying. Suddenly, the house begins to shake; there's a sound like a mighty wind; divided tongues of fire appear over their heads; they begin to speak in different languages; and *all* of them are filled with the Holy Spirit.

When the apostle Peter stands up to address the crowd, he searches for the words to describe such a strange and life-changing event. Seeing these wonders, he cannot help but hear the ancient whisper of the prophet Joel, speaking into their present circumstances.

*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 prophesy.  
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." (Acts 2.17–21)*

Two thousand years later, here we sit, children of the day of Pentecost, the first century church in the twenty-first century. Our buildings haven't shaken in a long time. There are no discernable tongues of fire over our heads; only English is spoken here. As for our sons and daughters, well, we can't remember any of them ever prophesying. In fact, we rarely hear the voices of our youth in our churches at all. We also have a hard time hearing the voices of the old. Yet, if you're a successful, educated, middle-aged white man in the prime of his life, we will listen.

This is *our* vision of the church. This is what *we* believe happens when the Spirit is poured out.

*In the last days,  
I will pour out my Spirit on choice flesh;  
your sons shall train to be leaders,  
your daughters shall remain silent.  
Your young men will do nothing until they are old enough and mature enough;  
your old men will be ignored.  
Your slaves—the working class, the poor, minorities, both men and women  
—will not be welcomed.*

*And everyone who hears, believes, repents, confesses and is baptized and worships with a cappella singing, always and only attends a "Church of Christ" that believes all the right doctrines . . . will be saved.*

Now that's a message of hope for our world!

Hopefully you catch my sarcasm. It doesn't take long for us to see that the world imagined by Joel, the world Peter declared to be breaking-in, is not our world. The prophetic vision remains today a dream, not a reality.

Instead of bringing all flesh together, the church has only caused more divisions. We have Catholic churches, Orthodox churches and Protestant churches. Then there are mainline Protestants and evangelical Protestants. We have Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans and Nazarenes. Within our own faith tradition, we have the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Churches (Churches of Christ), and the Churches of Christ. Among this last, complicated group, we've got even more divisions.

I have only mentioned general denominational divisions at this point. Yet, even within these denominational divisions, there are deeper divisions. Still today churches of every denomination are divided by race. Churches in the same tradition know nothing of one another simply because one congregation is a black church and another congregation is a white church. We are divided by nation. Even with the advancement of technology and travel, we still have very little knowledge about Christians from other countries, even those who hail from our same tradition.

Yet, in spite of the vast differences among denominations, one would think that here, in the local congregation, you would at least find some unity. Yet divisions also plague our local congregations. At the most basic expression of the church, we have economic divisions, political divisions, age divisions, gender divisions, personal preference differences . . . It could be argued that if a conflict can be imagined, the church, somewhere, has divided over it.

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," declares Paul (2 Cor 3.17). Yet, our behavior testifies to the opposite reality, that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is bondage, not freedom; division, not unity.

It is no surprise that in a world like ours, Christianity seems irrelevant. When the church looks so much like the world—why bother? When all the church can offer the world is some songs, a few prayers and a list of beliefs—what good is the church? Instead of healing the divisions in our world, we have only cemented them through our bigotry and ignorance in the name of the Lord. On our watch, the rich have continued to get richer while the poor have gotten poorer. Violence continues to be our nation's most used tool for conflict resolution. Those with whom we disagree are seen as the enemy, those whom we should hate, demean and discard as worthless. When a prophet stands up among us, calling us back to the prophetic vision of Joel—prophets like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Oscar Romero—proclaiming that the world does not have to be this way, that God can and will do a new thing; when these brave prophets stand up and prophesy to our divided, hostile world, we kill them!

If ever we needed to hear the prophetic word of the Lord, it is today. "Repent!" the prophet says. "Repent of your injustice. Repent of your division. Repent! And it will be! A new world will be!"

But wait a minute, preacher! Are you sure we're looking at the same world? This is the twenty-first century, after all, the days of feminism and affirmative action. Tolerance and political correctness is our creed. Throughout the country and the world, women are in positions of power that were shut off from them a generation ago and minorities are welcomed into many businesses, schools and institutions that were once very intentionally segregated. Regardless of your politics, the fact that a woman and a black man were two leading contenders for the highest office in our country is a sign of progress being made.

Sure we needed to hear the words of the prophet forty years ago when we killed Dr. King, when we threw stones and shot fire hoses at the civil rights marchers, when we told our daughters that their only hope of success was in the home or in the arms of a successful man. We would have heard the voice of the prophet in those days! But these days are different. In these days, the spirit of Pentecost is breaking through! Change is happening! The world is changing. The church is changing. Even Churches of Christ are changing.

Change may not be coming as quickly as we would like, but no one can deny that things have changed and still are changing. The Spirit *has* been poured out on all flesh; it's just taking us a long time to come around.

It is true that progress has been made, yet the prophet Joel stands before us today with a warning. Progress has been made, but the fact that there has been progress does not mean that we have arrived. The fact that the world is changing does not mean that no more change is needed.

For Joel's prophetic vision is expansive—no one is left out; everyone receives the Spirit. *All flesh*—he says!

All flesh? Well, what about our sons and daughters? And the prophet says, *All flesh!*

All flesh? What about our old men and women? *All flesh!*

All flesh? Certainly not the poor and the slaves? *All flesh!*

All flesh? Maybe the male slaves, but certainly you don't mean the lowliest of all, the female slaves? *All flesh! All flesh!*

Everyone from everywhere will receive the Spirit and they shall prophesy. The voices that were once silent will speak. The people that were once shut out will be let in. And when this happens, then you will know that the Spirit has come!

When you hear the wisdom of the Lord spoken from the mouths of children and from the elderly, you will know that the Spirit has come.

When you hear God speaking through the cries of the suffering, you will know that the Spirit has come.

When you see God in the face of the immigrant, the forgotten, the displaced and the different, you will know that the Spirit has come.

When you look around your congregation on Sunday and see people from every nation, tribe and tongue, you will know that the Spirit has come.

When all flesh is heard equally, welcomed and freely shares in the justice-bringing, ever loving spirit of God, you will know that the Spirit has come.

For when God's spirit shows up, our institutions of power are shaken, our dividing walls fall down, and the Spirit falls on all people.

Forty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. He was a modern day prophet who stood in the midst our places of power, staring down that power that was used to shut people like him up and out, and he boldly prophesied. He spoke of a new world, a world where all people were created equal. His prophetic word woke an oppressed people, filling them with the spirit of God as they worked together to make this prophetic vision a reality.

On the night before he was assassinated, King took his prophetic vision to the sanitation workers of Memphis who worked at the bottom of the ladder of power and were used to being exploited by those on the top. King stood before this group of oppressed people and painted for them his new-world-vision. As King saw it, the vision of the civil rights movement was not simply a fight for the rights of African Americans, but it was a fight for the rights and dignity of all Americans, and all human beings.

After school segregation was declared by the courts to be unconstitutional, many suggested this was enough. Yet King declared it was not enough. Then they desegregated the buses and lunch counters, and many thought they should be happy. But King was not happy. Then African Americans were given the right to vote, and many thought they got more than they deserved. But King wanted more.

For King had prophetic eyes, eyes that looked behind the curtain of our unjust, segregated, hate-filled world, and imagined the world as it would look through God's eyes. King saw a beautiful world, a world overflowing with God's spirit, falling on all flesh equally, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity or social standing.

Seeing what God hopes for the world as it should be, King could never be satisfied with the world as it is. That is why the progress made was not enough. Progress would never be enough until justice rolled down like a river on all flesh, and every human being, no matter her or his race, gender, income, or social standing, was allowed to drink at justice's refreshing waters.

As King ended his speech that night in Memphis, he spoke again of this prophetic vision. His words today are haunting, knowing that he was killed the next day.

"Like anybody," he said, "I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"<sup>1</sup>

King's vision is Joel's vision. Joel's vision is God's vision, a vision of a world of equality and justice, where God's spirit is poured out on all flesh.

May we have the courage to climb the mountain and see the world as God intends for it to be, and then have the courage to come down the mountain and join with the pentecostal Spirit of God, fighting for justice and equality until all flesh, no matter the age, race, income, gender, or social standing, may become alive by the power of the unifying, wall-breaking, all-loving Spirit of God.

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1. Martin Luther King Jr., "I See the Promised Land," April 3, 1968 as quoted in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 286.