

A Storytelling Commentary on Acts 2:1-21

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This story is of such importance that it deserves to be fully told. It has great energy in it for the transformation of congregations. This story could be the central part of a festival of storytelling to celebrate the deeds of power done by God in the establishment of the church.

This is a long story, primarily because of Peter's speech but it needs to be told as a whole, not truncated as in the lectionary readings. Without Peter's speech, the story of Pentecost loses its full impact. Pentecost is a prelude to the conversion of the people of Jerusalem. It is the birthday of the church because it is when there were significant numbers for the first time. I strongly recommend that you tell this whole story because Pentecost is a day like Easter or Good Friday when we tell long stories.

The Structure of the Story

The first part of the story describes the sign of the divided tongues of fire and the gift of other languages. This event is significant because the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples to go out and speak in many languages. The languages are listed in the third episode, which is a kind of tour of the ancient near east. This part of the story ends with people asking what it all means. Some say the disciples are just drunk. This cynical response leads into Peter explaining the meaning.

As Peter explains, the gift of languages means what was promised by the prophet Joel has been fulfilled. It's the fulfillment of prophecy and the sign of the dawning of the new age of God. The sign of this is the resurrection of Jesus. After the quotation of Joel, Peter tells the story of what happened: Jesus was attested as the Messiah, was crucified, and God raised him up. Peter gives a summary of the gospel story.

Next Peter provides proof by creative exegesis of the Psalms. He connects the Pentecost event by interpreting the Psalms as prophecies. Peter first recites David's song that says, "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption." This is the crux of Peter's argument: David did not prophecy about himself, because he died and was buried in the tomb. Rather, he was speaking about the resurrection of the Messiah.

Then Peter repeats the story of Jesus: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." The interpretation of the apostles speaking in many languages is then: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear."

Peter then quotes David again, this time in relation to the ascension. Peter asserts that David also prophesied about the ascension: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Peter interprets the phrase as meaning, "the Lord [that is, God] said to my Lord [that is, the Messiah—Jesus]." Thus, "my Lord" refers to the Messiah and not to David. So on the basis of this connection and of David's amazing words of prophecy about Jesus, Peter argues that the resurrection, the ascension, and the gift of the Spirit mean that: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Here ends Peter's speech.

The last part of the story tells about the responses of those who were present. "But 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 recommends that they be baptized, and so they were: "That day about three thousand persons were added to their number." The ending describes the formation, growth and activities of the new faith community. It tells what they did and the wonderful things that happened in Jerusalem.

If you pay attention to this structure, it makes it a lot easier to learn the story because you see what is happening. Attending to the structure of the story also helps in its recital, because you can remember the logic, flow and result of Peter's speech.

The Dynamics of the Story

The basic dynamic of the story is a retelling of the story of Jesus. It is told in relation to the hopes and anticipation of the people of Israel for a Messiah since the time of David. So who was the Messiah?

The Messiah was to be David's son. The citation of all these things from David connects Jesus with the Davidic tradition. David, approximately 1000 years before Jesus, foresaw these events. This is an amazing development. Finally, after all those years, a son of David has come—an anointed one, whom God has appointed as both Lord and Messiah.

The rhetoric of blame is not what is going on in Peter's speech. Peter is not accusing or blaming the people. Rather, what Peter states in regard to the crucifixion of the Messiah is the rhetoric of implication, of being truly involved in this horrendous act: the one for whom we have been waiting for a thousand years has come at last, and we had a major role in his crucifixion. Being "cut to the heart" is the people's recognition of their guilt, of being liable to judgment by God.

So, in terms of why one needs to be saved, one needs to be saved from being judged by God for Jesus' death. Repentance, then, is turning around and changing our minds in relation to Jesus. It is to be baptized, so that the sins we have committed, most strikingly the sin in regards to Jesus' death, is forgiven. It is a baptism into the new age of the Messiah. It is a baptism of cleansing of the rejection of Jesus as Messiah. It is also the

promise of the future of this new age for them, for their children, and for all those "far off," that is, the peoples of the world.

This story is a truly transformational story that involves a retelling of the Gospels, but now in a very different way by connecting the events of Jesus' death and resurrection explicitly with these somewhat puzzling quotations from David. The quotations are seen as prophesies of what has now taken place. These connections were a very powerful argument for the messiahship of Jesus to those who heard this story in the first century.

A challenge in telling the story is finding an appropriate characterization of Peter. He is energetic and full of passion. This is really Peter's first speech in Luke/Acts. He suddenly becomes a great speaker, having been one who was uncertain, who was highly emotional, and who responded in a variety of ways, including running away. This speech is a sign of the transformation of Peter, and his sudden discovery that he could speak, and speak in such a way as to evoke significant response.