

## **From White to Red**

### Acts 2:1-21

The church year has seasons. We just finished the Easter season, which lasts nearly seven weeks. The sanctuary vestments and the choir's and my stoles were white throughout that time. White stands for purity and hope, appropriate for the Easter message. Today—and only today for the entire calendar year—we have put on red. It is the Day of Pentecost. In the church context, red symbolizes the fiery power of the Holy Spirit. We also think of red as standing for the purifying actions a fire can take. In a few moments we will work our way through Acts 2, which while familiar to many, may have been a bit confusing as we read it.

Next week we will go back to white in honor of Trinity Sunday. For the next twenty-five weeks after that we will adorn our sanctuary and ourselves with green. Green has no widely-agreed symbolic meaning. But this, too, is appropriate. We call those twenty-five weeks Ordinary Time. They represent the longest stretch of sameness in the liturgical calendar. Ordinary Time has no special days in it at all, at least not in the Presbyterian tradition. This will take us all the way to November 24, Christ the King Sunday, for which we will go back to white. The very next day marks the start of Advent, for which the proper color is purple. In the church purple represents penitence, self-examination, confession of sin. When we call Advent a season of reparation, that is how we believe we ought to prepare for Christmas.

At Christmas we change back white for the Twelve Days of Christmas, right through Epiphany. A few more weeks of Ordinary Time follow, again in green, until we reach Transfiguration Sunday and its white vestments. Finally, we enter the forty days of Lent, another season of preparation and thus, of purple.

Back to the Day of Pentecost. The Old Testament Hebrews had celebrated this high feast day since the Exodus some twelve- to thirteen hundred years before the Day of Pentecost we read about today. They associated it with the moment God gave the tablets of the Law to Moses. They considered it one of four holiest days in their religious year. They encouraged one another to make pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Imagine the city overrun by thousands of Jews from every corner of Israel—and even beyond. Our passages lists fifteen nations and/or cities present on this first occurrence of the new Day of Pentecost. We do not know how many Christians were gathered, but it must have been at least fifteen! The passage said that each person in that throng could understand those Christians speaking in his or her own native language.

Why had the Christians gathered in the first place? Most of them came from Galilee, around one hundred miles to the north, a solid four days of walking. They had stayed in and around Jerusalem ever since Jesus led them there weeks and weeks earlier. In fact, for a time they laid low, stayed sheltered in place. After all, they were known to have followed Jesus, whom the Jews and their Roman masters had recently executed. The remaining eleven of the original band of Jesus followers had just

named a man named Matthias to round out their number at twelve. That number had important connotations to them. All Jews, they remembered the twelve tribes of Israel. The so-called Minor Prophets in their scripture numbered twelve. And still do in our Old Testament.

Luke wrote Acts. He came right out and said he had written his Gospel as Volume One of a two volume set. Which makes Acts Volume Two. In our passage he writes on the Feast Day of Pentecost, “they were all together in one place.” In fact, they are in a house. And along comes the Holy Spirit. First they see “tongues as of fire.” The Greek Luke wrote used two different words for these tongues of flame, and the tongues in which the Spirit empowered those gathered in that house to speak. It just so happens in English that “tongues” covers both things with one word. These tongues of fire are, “distributed and resting on each one of them.”

Let us pause for a moment to try to visualize this. What does this look like? What do these first Christians think? How do they feel? In about 1545 the great painter Titian depicted the scene. Notably (and accurately) he included women in the group. One woman has her hands folded and head bowed in a classic pose of submission. Another woman looks at the flames with terror on her face. The men have a wide variety of postures and expressions. Two of them reach up as though eagerly meeting the flames. The moment captured appears to happen at the very start of the event. Nobody in the painting appears to be saying anything. Yet. But Luke plows straight ahead with, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began

to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

A few words about what these tongues are *not*. Elsewhere in the New Testament we find descriptions of speaking in tongues. The Apostle Paul calls this a spiritual gift. He understands this as producing a sound that belongs to no existing human language. Indeed, he adds that when anybody speaks in tongues in this way, another person must come forward with the interpretation of what has sounded to all like gibberish. Here in Acts, Luke carefully defines the Pentecost experience as the Holy Spirit empowering Christians to speak in existing foreign languages. The sound—combined with the sound of a mighty wind at the start—drew masses of people. Here we find that list of fifteen nationalities and city states. They bracket the Eastern Mediterranean and well into Asia, the Saudi Peninsula and much of northern Africa. Luke does not specify it, but most commentators think it safe to assume these are Jews from all around, come to Jerusalem on their Pentecost pilgrimage.

In a bit of an understatement, Luke tells us these crowds “were amazed and perplexed, (asking), ‘What does this mean?’” They have just heard these Galileans telling of the “mighty works of God” *in their own native languages*. Would you not also be amazed and perplexed? Or does the sheer implausibility of this miracle lead you to search for a different explanation? Some of the eyewitnesses tried to explain it away as drunkenness. Peter stands up and (Luke tells us) “lift(s) his voice.” He first defends against the drunkenness charge, pointing out it is only about 9:00 in the morning. Clearly, Peter never visited the casino or a fraternity house.

The Holy Spirit has not finished its work. It now inspires Peter to share a lengthy quote from one of those Minor Prophets, Joel. (An aside: we call them “minor” not because they have less importance, but because their books are much shorter than those of the four Major Prophets.) The quote is apocalyptic. It describes the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment. “And in the last days,” it starts. This refers to the *last* days. People of all genders and ages will receive visions from the Holy Spirit. It will empower them to dream dreams. This comes from a time and place when most people fervently believed dreams came as messages from the gods. So dreaming dreams means hearing straight from the Lord God Almighty. And what messages might those dreams bear? Peter (and Joel) do not specify this, but they repeatedly state people will *prophesy*.

They will join the long, ancient line of prophets empowered to speak the word of the Lord. And what has just happened? The Galileans have become empowered and emboldened to speak about the “mighty acts of God.” Peter is implying those last days have arrived. Blood, fire and smoke. The sun and moon falling from the sky. Like all apocalyptic visions this is threatening and bleak. But it concludes on a note of hope: “And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Well, that sounds more promising! But how? And to whom? The lectionary cuts our passage today off here. But Peter has a great deal more to say. He continues to dive straight into a review of the life, death, life again and the teachings of “Jesus of Nazareth”. Confess your faith in Jesus, Peter says, and you *shall* be saved even on the terrible Day of the Lord.

That remains the most important take-away for us today. Call upon the name of Jesus. Have faith in his righteousness. Accept that he really died on the cross. There he paid the ransom for our sins. Yet we must still *believe*. That is the key part of calling on his name. Have faith that he really rose from the tomb on Easter. Trust that his Holy Spirit still works at empowering people. Here are a few testimonies I have heard others make—though perhaps they did not mean their statements as testimony. Nevertheless, they were.

One woman said that she continually asked God for the patience and strength to continue caring for her mother, who had dementia. *And it worked.*

One man said the political arguments where he worked had gotten mean and personal. Vicious. He called his father, a minister, for advice on what to say. His father told him, "It's more in what you don't say. Politely refuse to argue and eventually it should get better." *It did.*

A teen received the diagnosis of one of those horrible wasting diseases. He flatly rejected God in that moment. Friends from their church youth group put together a prayer schedule, so one of them would be praying for him at least four hours a day. Eventually, the initial shock wore off and he began to recover his own spirit. He came back to the group. They never told him they were praying for him.

Call upon the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He will give you the Holy Spirit (or give you more of it, depending on where you are in your faith journey). He will save you from despair and give you hope. He will heal you spiritually. Call upon the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.