

Our Place in the Big Story

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

June 20, 2010
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Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 (NRSV)

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Romans 12:9-18 (NRSV)

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

What could possibly follow Act 4, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? Where could the story go? It comes to us. Act 5 is the act in which we live. It is the story of God's Spirit forming God's people into the Church and empowering them to build for the kingdom of God.

We are fast approaching the end of our six-act play, this telling of the entire biblical story from Genesis to Revelation, from the beginning to the end. This week, we come to Act 5, the story of the Church, the body of Christ. It is in the midst of this act that we find ourselves.

Act One *Act Two* *Act Three* *Act Four* *Act Five* *Act Six*
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

Let's begin by looking again at the story to this point. In Acts 1 and 2, God creates everything, including humans in God's image. All is good until the humans rebel against God, seeking to be like gods themselves. This rebellion not only destroys the humans' relationship with God but even damages God's creation. In Act 3, God sets out on a new course. The creator of the cosmos chooses one couple through whose family all peoples would be blessed. God rescues this family from slavery and pursues them without end.

God also makes a covenant to protect and preserve them. But God asks two things in return. His people are to love God and love one another. However, the people of God would remain rebellious and sinful, understanding little about what it really means to love. Sadly, God's people proved unable to live up to their end of the covenant. Thus the question at the end of Act 3 is this: Would God's covenantal promises of restoration and renewal go forever unkept?

But in Act 4, we learn that the covenantal promises of God have been kept, for God provided, in his only Son, the one faithful Jew who would truly love God and neighbor, who would keep the covenant. Thus, through the faith of Jesus Christ, the representative Messiah, the people of God are restored to a right relationship with God, whose victory over sin and death was won on a cross.

When the curtain falls on Act 4, we can rightly ask: *What's next?* If Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God, what could Act 5 be about? This is really our own question. What are we about? What is our own place in God's story?

The answer to these questions is the story of Act 5. It is yet unfinished and we are part of it every day. It is the story of God's Church, the fellowship formed by and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. And the story begins at the festival of Pentecost, six weeks after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit returns

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus' disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, with the population having swelled to more than 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God's Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and "to the ends of the earth" (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus' crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death to newly embodied life; his resurrection had changed everything. They didn't know what to expect, but they wouldn't have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" (from today's passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power. *Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God's dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God's people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God's presence had departed the temple, "Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . ." (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God had not forever abandoned his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). Now, as the disciples sat together, that day had come, the Holy Spirit had returned.

What does it mean?

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they were able to speak in languages that they couldn't possibly have known. It would be like me leaping up and speaking in Russian. The disciples weren't speaking nonsense. They were speaking languages that could be understood by festival pilgrims from all over the empire. It was like God was undoing the scattering of languages that followed his destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

Needless to say, the crowds were “amazed and perplexed.” What was going on? What could such a thing possibly mean? Some in the crowd tried to dismiss the whole spectacle, accusing the disciples of drunkenness. But the disciples were not drunk and Peter rose to explain to the crowds what was happening.

The disciples are not drunk, Peter said. This is God’s work! Prophecies are being fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection it is all happening. This is not alcohol talking, but the Holy Spirit, who is the sign of Christ’s power and glory and who is empowering the disciples to do the work of the kingdom. Rather than trying to dismiss the disciples’ miraculous abilities, Peter tells them, the crowds ought to repent so that their sins will be forgiven and they too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

God builds his Church

The Book of Acts is the second-half of a two volume work by Luke. In it, he tells the story of the first 30 years or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection. An important key to understanding Acts is to see that the key driver in the story, the one who makes things happen, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes in great power to Jesus’ disciples on Pentecost (Acts 2), when Jews from all over the empire were in Jerusalem for an important Jewish festival. From the story of Pentecost, Luke goes on to tell us about the establishment and growth of the church in Jerusalem and how Jewish leaders began their attempts to stamp out this blasphemous cult.

Three or so years after Jesus’ resurrection, Saul/Paul was visited by the living Christ while on his way to round up Christians in Damascus (Acts 9). Paul emerges as a leader in the early church and becomes the missionary to the Gentiles. Acts tells us of three missionary journeys Paul made over a period of eight years or so (50AD–58AD); one trip in Asia Minor and two trips through Greece. Many of Paul’s letters in the New Testament were written to churches he founded on these trips – 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, and so on. The Book of Acts closes with Paul in Rome under house arrest as he awaits trial before Caesar. This was probably about 62AD.

With the exception of most of Paul’s letters and, perhaps, Mark’s Gospel, all the New Testament writings are from the three decades after the end of Acts. They tell the story of the Church striving to stay true to God’s teachings in a hostile world.

You can read more about the Holy Spirit and the Church by going back to the Weekly Bible Study of March 21, 2010. In it, I discuss them at some length as part of the series on the Apostles’ Creed. All the weekly studies are archived at www.scottengle.org.

But for now, I want to consider what sort of church we are to be. Are we to be, as Michael Breen and Walt Kallestad¹ urges, a Church with the passion demonstrated by Peter on Pentecost.

Something big

Read through any company’s annual reports over the years and you’ll find a common theme. Every year is “momentous” and “without precedent.” Every year, according to the reports, management is faced with difficulties and challenges that have never been seen before. Listen to politicians and pundits. Even theologians and teachers. It seems that we always want to believe that we live in momentous times, perhaps the most important period in our nation’s, or company’s, or church’s history. Why? Why is it so important for us to believe we face challenges greater than anyone has faced before us?

I think it is because we all want to be part of something big. We want to be part of something that transcends the ordinariness of our daily lives. We need to believe that our lives and our work *really* matter. Thus, it is all the more odd that many Christians so easily marginalize “church.” Church becomes a place to see friends for a little while on Sunday

¹In 2005, our fall sermon series introduced us to some great ideas from Breen and Kalletad on the importance of being passionate disciples in a passionate church.

morning, or a place where we come to learn a little more about how to be nice or how to be happy – but certainly nothing BIG.

In the second of today's Scripture passages, Peter blows out of the water all attempts to marginalize church and faith. Christians, he writes, are a community chosen and formed by God so that we might proclaim God to the world, so that all those who are blind to God's "mighty acts" might see the truth. Re-read the passage from 1 Peter. Peter's words ought to make your heart race a bit, stoking passion in your heart. God desires for us to be passionate disciples *so that* we might be a passionate church *so that* we may effectively proclaim God to the world what we say and in what we do – in who we are. Peter wrote to encourage Christians who were being persecuted and shunned. He sought to strengthen their resolve by reminding them of their true identities. They were the people of God, God's colonists as it were, who would never be abandoned by God and whose purpose could never be diminished. We are no less the people of God, chosen for a purpose larger than ourselves.

What's a passionate church look like?

Like Peter, Paul wanted to help the newly-formed Christian communities grasp their true identity. Also like Peter, Paul would go on to teach these communities what it meant to live as God's people. This was not about showing the Christians how to be happy or even nice. All of Paul's teachings about Christian behavior can be summed up in this way: do what builds up the community, do what is a good witness to those on the outside, avoid what tears down the community, and avoid what is a bad witness. For Paul, contributing to the needs of others and showing hospitality (v. 13 in today's passage from Romans) are good acts in themselves, but they are part of the larger purpose. Generosity and kindness proclaim to others God's goodness and power.

I want to be clear here. Living in harmony with one another (v. 16), rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep (v. 15)– these are all good in and of themselves. But they are part of a larger purpose. Loving one another with mutual affection (v. 10) is part of how we carry out God's charge to us to be the light to the world. God calls us to love God and one another *with passion*, to build up St. Andrew *with passion*, to protect the community that God has entrusted to us *with passion*, to serve others *with passion*, to give *with passion*, to learn *with passion*. Always and everything, *with passion*. Notice what Paul writes in v. 11: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." Paul is talking here about what we've been calling passion. Are we passionate about Jesus? Are we passionate about St. Andrew? Are we a passionate church? Here is how Eugene Peterson has rendered v. 10 in *The Message*: "Don't burn out: keep yourselves fueled and aflame." Do our hearts burn?

Looking ahead

Stories have endings. God's story too is heading somewhere, toward the complete restoration of all God's creation. Yet, the ending is not like others. The End is not an event, to be found on a timeline. At the End, is a person, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord God Almighty, the Beginning and the End. The final act in God's drama is the story of the End.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Galatians 1:13-24 Paul redirects his passion, from the destruction of the Church to its growth.

Tuesday, Galatians 5:13-26 A passionate church lives by the Spirit.

Wednesday, Ephesians 4:1-16 A passionate church is unified and mature.

Thursday, Colossians 1:3-14 A passionate church is faithful and thankful.

Friday, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10 A passionate church lives to please God.

Saturday, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 A passionate church is generous.

Who are the people of God?

Who are the people of God? Who will spend eternity in loving communion with God? Who will see God's face (Rev 22:4)? The Jews of Jesus' day rightly understood that they had been chosen by God to be his agents in the renewal of all creation – the Jews were YHWH's people. But . . . who was a Jew? The people of God were those who lived in covenant relationship with God and submitted themselves to the obligations of that covenant. If you worshipped the LORD God and strived to keep his Law, you were a Jew; you were part of God's people. Ruth was not an Israelite, but because she chose to follow YHWH and keep his law, she became part of God's people and was the great-grandmother of King David. When the Jews understood this correctly (they sometimes forgot), they knew that "Jewish-ness" was not a matter of DNA, but of keeping God's law.

Thus, we should not be surprised that many of the first Christians¹, all of whom were Jewish, believed that one had to become a Jew first, in order to become a Christian. Some early Christians, like Paul, disagreed. In practice, this became an argument over circumcision. For many Jewish Christians, including Peter, the circumcision of male children was a sign of God's covenant and if a male gentile wanted to become part of God's people, he had to be circumcised. Paul saw this very differently. He argued that because of Jesus, the "badge of membership" in the people of God had changed. No longer were God's people marked out by their keeping of the Law, but by their faith in Jesus Christ. If a Jewish Christian wanted to keep the law, that was fine; but it was not required. The only "marker" of God's people was to be faith in Jesus Christ. If you placed your trust in Jesus, you were part of God's people; if you did not place your trust in Jesus, you were not part of God's people. In about 50AD, this debate was settled in the Christian community at a council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The council affirmed the admission of gentiles (non-Jews) into the church without any requirement of circumcision.

¹This can all get terribly confusing if you do not remember that ALL the first Christians were Jews. It was 10 years or so after Jesus' resurrection before a non-Jew became a Christian. Most Jews did not become Christians. They did not accept Jesus as Messiah, much less as God himself. It is not hard to see why. Jews in Jesus' day awaited a Messiah who would come in power and might and wonder and glory. To them, the idea that the Messiah would end up crucified on a Roman cross was absurd. Indeed, in their mind, any "would-be" Messiah who got himself crucified was, quite obviously, not the Messiah after all!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

On Pentecost, the disciples found (or better, were found by) all the passion and purpose that they could ever imagine. How could Peter, an inconsequential fisherman from Galilee, give a speech that captivated thousands? God's Spirit grabbed, filled, and powered him for astonishing work and witness for Christ. The book of Acts ought to be titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for it is the Holy Spirit who pushes and drives everyone forward, always pointing the way and strengthening the believers for their work.

It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, this is not magic. The Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline.

What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work . . . but to work with a new purpose. What is our purpose in this fifth act? More to the point, what is *your* purpose?

**Coming up in Scott's 11:00 Sunday class
Continuing in Festival Hall:**

What the Bible Really Says about Angels and Demons

Few biblical topics are as encrusted with legend, fanciful readings, and misunderstandings as that of the Bible's angels and demons. Join us as we spend a few exploring what the Bible really has to say about this endless intriguing subject.

June 20: Angels and Demons in the New Testament

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Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 11:45 - 1:15, Room 127. Just drop in!

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Scott's Sermons and Weekly Bible Studies are available at
www.standrewumc.org.

Just go to "worship" and then "sermons online."

There is also an archive of all 400+ studies at www.scottengle.org

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

You will also be able to join the Yahoo group (sa_studies) so you can get the Bible studies e-mailed to you each week.