

DID YOU GET IT?

Pentecost 2012

Acts 2:1-21

Are we missing something?

That's a question that in the back of our minds sometimes, especially concerning the day of Pentecost. We hear the story from Acts 2, the creation of the Church with all its excitement. We hear about the loud rushing wind, the tongues of fire descending upon the disciples, the multitudes hearing the message in different languages, and about 3,000 people baptized on that day. Furthermore, hearing this wonderful story, we read into the text a lot of zeal and fervor on the part of those first Christians. They must have been excited: 3,000 heard, believed and were baptized. Now, that's a good day's work.

But are we missing something? After all, life here at Messiah Lutheran Church isn't quite as exciting as that day of Pentecost, and we are tempted to be disappointed. Is it something we're doing wrong? Have we gone off course? There are plenty of people out there who would add to our frustration by telling us that yes, we have gone off course; yes, we are missing something; and yes, you need to throw out a lot of that "Lutheran" stuff and get back to being the early church.

But is that true? Are we really missing something? Has the Lutheran Church departed from the Scriptures, becoming so fixated on doctrine that it's forgotten about missions and evangelism?

Our Pentecost epistle, Acts 2:1-18, gives us a wonderful opportunity to talk about missions, so let us do so in two parts. We'll first talk about "What we're missing, and what we have," and then "What we have and what we do."

I. WHAT WE'RE MISSING, AND WHAT WE HAVE

Are we missing something from the day of Pentecost? Yes. But what? Let's look at the text: "*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance*" (Acts 2:1-4).

We go on to hear that there were in Jerusalem devout men from every nation. We hear that some that mock the apostles, but Peter preaches to the crowd and declares that this Pentecost miracle is a fulfillment of prophecy in Joel. Many believe, and that day 3000 souls were baptized.

That's quite a day, a great miracle performed by our Lord. But are we missing something? Yes! Now, here's the question: What are we missing?

Here's the answer: Wind and fire. As we are gathered here today for divine service, the sanctuary is not filled with a loud, rushing wind. I don't see tongues of fire dancing on the heads of anyone in the sanctuary. We don't have wind and fire like they did at that first New Testament Pentecost. That's what we're missing, and it's not a big mystery why. When something big happens in the Lord's plan of salvation, He kicks it off with a special event. At the crucifixion, there is darkness, earthquake and a torn curtain in the temple. At the Resurrection, saints are raised from the dead and testify. At the first Pentecost, there's loud rushing wind and fire.

But we don't have wind and fire. But what do we have?

We have the Word of God, we have the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News that He has died to take away our sins. We don't have any living apostles, but we do have their apostolic teachings. It was this same message that St. Peter proclaimed to the crowds that day; the same message that saved 3,000 souls in one day is the same one that is proclaimed here at Messiah Lutheran Church.

Do we have anything else? You bet! We have Holy Baptism. The same Baptism received by those who believed that day is given to each of you. It's the same Baptism which washes away your sins, grants life and salvation.

So, we don't have loud wind and tongues of fire. But we do have the Word and Holy Baptism. If you ask me, that's a pretty good deal. Wind and fire don't take sins away. But Word and Baptism does.

You might be thinking wait a minute Pastor, 3000 people were baptized that day. 3000! After one sermon! Something was happening there so powerfully that 3000 people were baptized into the faith without going through Catechism or adult instruction. Surely this means something, doesn't it?

We are tempted to think so, aren't we? We are tempted to believe that the Holy Spirit was more active back then, or else that we're not making use of the Holy Spirit as we once did, somehow we must be quenching His work. (Or we may be tempted to think that we place too much of an emphasis on Christian instruction.) But we better not speculate. Let us see what the text has to say.

The text declares that there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). This makes sense: Pentecost was a major festival; any devout Jew was supposed to come to Jerusalem for worship. During Pentecost population of Jerusalem could swell to a million or more.

Who came to Jerusalem? Devout Jews! These were men well-schooled in the Old Testament. They had been taught throughout their lives the Word of God. They had been thoroughly taught the Law of God, and they had been well-catechized in God's promises of the Messiah. In fact, from the Old Testament, they knew everything about the Savior except for one thing: His Name!

When Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, what does he proclaim? He tells them the Savior's name. He declares that the Savior they have been seeking, the Messiah for whom they had been waiting, has come. He declares to them that Jesus, whom they crucified, has died to take away their sins. For these devout men waiting for the Messiah, Peter fills in the last piece of the puzzle. Quoting from the Old Testament again and again, he proclaims that Jesus is long-expected Messiah, and He has accomplished their salvation.

These men had a lifetime's worth of careful catechesis. Rejoicing that the Savior has come, 3,000 of them believe and are baptized.

Now, I don't want to take away from this miracle of 3,000 baptisms; each time someone is saved, it is a miracle for it is solely the work of the Holy Spirit. But consider this: If a million devout men are in Jerusalem, and 3000 are baptized, that means that only 3 tenths of one percent of these devout men were baptized that day. This would receive rave criticism from many church-growth authors, who say that a phone-canvass program should produce at least a 4% positive response.

So what's my point? I want to make two points.

The first is this: From a human perspective, missions have always been tough, often slow and difficult. St. Paul preached and many believed; but at other times they stoned him. Missions and evangelism can be discouraging to us because we expect the Lord to act according to our schedule, producing results quickly and steadily. But that means that we are trying to impose our will and schedule upon the Lord. I suppose that, from a human perspective, mission work in some ways is easier and tougher today than it ever has been before. To our advantage, we have a lot of modern technology and help to learn the Word and get the Word out. To our disadvantage, we don't have that Pentecost pool of devout believers, just waiting for that last puzzle piece to fall into place.

The second point is this: Whether mission work for us is easy or not, the Lord remains the same. By remaining the same, the Lord remains faithful to His promises, continuing to grant salvation by His means of grace, for the sake of His Son who died for us. Some mission fields are fertile and some are nearly barren; but the Word of God is the Word of God, and this is how He visits us in order to save us from our sin. What a great comfort this is for the Church; rather than trying to measure the mission by ever changing statistical reports, we have God's holy Word to tell us whether or not we are on track.

We may not have wind and fire. But we do have Word and Sacrament, and that's how the Lord saves, when and where He wills.

II. WHAT WE HAVE AND WHAT WE DO

I do pray that this news brings you comfort, hope and liberation. I hope that it saves you from disappointment or worry, and grants you the glad confidence that the Lord is just as present here today, with you, as He was with the apostles on that birth day of the Church. I hope that you do not receive this news as an attempt on my part to hide our shortcomings or a way to spin our doctrine so that it looks good. If we find that our doctrine fails to be true to Scripture, we must repent and return to the Word of the Lord.

Most of all today, we want to rejoice in the goodness of God, in the forgiveness that He grants us in His means of grace, for the sake of Jesus.

I pray you are encouraged, for one of the greatest obstacles we face is discouragement. In fact, somebody once noted that present-day Lutherans seem to suffer from a malady called "Lutheran shame." The symptoms of Lutheran shame are that we are under the impression that our doctrine isn't all it could be. We find ourselves thinking things like, "Yes, we have good doctrine, but we're just not 'alive' like other churches." Or "We Lutherans are just too concerned with doctrine, and not enough with missions." Or, "Lutheran doctrine is okay, but we need something else when it comes to evangelism, when it comes to saving the unsaved, we need to be more like the Baptist or the Pentecostals."

"We just don't have 'it' like some other churches do." (Whatever "it" means!)

And so we begin to grow ashamed of what we believe, teach and confess as a church. And growing ashamed of what we believe and teach, we don't like that feeling at all; and so we begin to look around, trying to find something that we can add or change in order to bring life into the church, or at least to change things a bit so we're not so ashamed for doing what we do.

At times like that, we're quick to stray from the Word of God, and quick to look to the deeds of men instead. We look at other churches where the grass seems greener and we want to do what they are doing. We look at other churches that are growing faster and we want to adopt their methods for growth, whether it's scriptural or not. We become weary of being careful with doctrine and practice, and try to ignore our doctrine in the name of expediency. As the discouragement takes hold, we are less likely to involve ourselves in the tasks that need to be done in and around the church.

For these things we need to repent. The measure of any church is not how big it is in terms of facility, faculty, numbers or budget; the measure of any church is whether or not it remains faithful to the Scriptures. The measure of any missionary effort is not how many converts it receives; but how purely and rightly it proclaims God's Word and stewards His Holy Sacraments.

Is it possibly that it is not our doctrine that is holding us back? Could it be that we are hesitant to believe and practice it, not quite being "sold" on it as true and right and good? Could it be that the problem is not with our teachings, but with us? After all, what could be more enlivening, exciting, and joy-giving than the news that by His means of grace, the Lord - who died for you - grants you eternal life and salvation?

Oh, dear fellow redeemed, let us not doubt or be discouraged. Let us faithfully examine God's Word and preserve His precious teachings. Preserve it, not in the sense of putting it in a jar on the shelf and never addressing it again. Preserve it in the sense of this: Let us continue to proclaim exactly what God's Word declares, so that people might hear and believe. Let us carefully preserve God's Word in all its purity and truth, so that we might continue to declare that saving Word throughout all generations.

For the Lord continues to pour out His Spirit on all flesh. He continues to grant us grace through His precious means of grace, and by these means the Holy Spirit is at work to justify and sanctify you. This is the Good News of life and salvation; indeed, there is no better news to be heard.

Along with these means of grace come other gifts of God's faithfulness. The Lord continues to call pastors into the Holy Ministry, and gives them that office so that they might publicly proclaim His Word and administer His sacraments in their purity and truth. This is the office of the pastor, for God has ordained it. And where congregations are not yet present, pastors are sent as missionaries to teach the Word of God, to gather people into a God-pleasing fellowship so that the Church might continue there.

By these means of grace, by the proclaimed Word and Sacraments, the Lord continues to grant forgiveness and faith to His people, sanctifying you so that you might depart from this place and go about the vocations that He has given you. And so the people of God receive His grace, and by that grace they grow in faith. In faith, you go about your vocations. You work hard in service to their fellow man and bosses. Parents take on the responsibility of teaching their children and grandchildren about Jesus - don't neglect this important mission and evangelism! And, as opportunity arises, the people of God give an answer to all who ask about the hope that is within them (1 Peter 3:15).

This is the mission program of God, the evangelism program that He declares in His Word. If each of us truly rejoices in the means of grace and goes about the vocation that God has given us, there is no time or room for shame or discouragement. There is only the joy of the Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters in the faith; cast off all gloom and sadness. Do not be misled to be discouraged or ashamed of what we teach and practice here; it is in accordance with the Word of God and we have the blessing of our Lord. Let us never fail to rejoice in what is right. For what happens here is exactly what happened on the first birth day of the Church, on that Pentecost after the first Easter: The Lord still pours out His Holy Spirit upon you this day, granting you forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. He does so with the same means He used on that Pentecost Day - His holy Word, His sacrament of Baptism. (And for the Christian who is instructed and prepared, He continues to forgive and strengthen us by His Holy Supper.)

Are we missing something?

A better question is, "Did you get it?" Did you get that the Lord has provided life and salvation for the sake of His Son. We are missing nothing that the Lord hasn't promised to give to us. May we rejoice in this precious gift and never fail to proclaim it to all who will hear: for in this Gospel is life and salvation in Jesus Christ. For in Jesus all your sins have been forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in Jesus name, Amen and Amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.