The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.

Sermon for Pentecost Day, Year A

Text: Acts 2:1-21

"What does this mean?"

Do you remember hearing that question before? It's the question Luther regularly poses in the Small Catechism, teaching us what the key articles of faith mean for our daily life as we live as Christians in today's world. "What does this mean?"

It's the very question the crowd asked in today's text. So much was going on:

> *a sudden sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages (tongues) as the Spirit enabled them. Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another: "What does this mean?"*

To answer that question perhaps we need to ask another one: for what purpose was this great crowd of "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven assembled in Jerusalem?"

Luke tells us that they had gathered there for the festival of Pentecost: "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place". Pentecost wasn't some new random *thing* to just happen on the day these people had gathered, but one of the main celebrations on the Jewish calendar ever since God's people had taken possession of the land he had promised to them.

The reason for this festival was to celebrate God's gracious provision to Israel of their own land, and ask for his continued blessing on their agriculture by offering him the first fruits of their harvest. This Pentecost festival was intrinsically linked to the one before it: Passover. The Passover festival celebrated God's mighty rescue of his people from slavery to the Egyptians. On that night the people were to slaughter a lamb and eat it roasted with flat bread and bitter herbs and paint their door frames with its blood. God promised that when he came to bring judgment on the Egyptians, he would graciously pass over all the homes so marked with the blood of the sacrificial lambs, before leading them to safety through the Red Sea. God commanded that this meal be celebrated every year to commemorate how God passed over them in judgment and rescued them. Fifty days after this Passover celebration ('Pentecost' itself means 'fifty') Israel was to commemorate the feast of Pentecost.

That is why there were God-fearing Jews from every nation that had gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost in our text. As they did, they heard a sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven and saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. It was just what Jesus had promised in last week's Gospel reading—when Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection and before he ascended into heaven, he assured them that he would send what the Father had promised: the Holy Spirit. They were to wait in Jerusalem for the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit through Jesus:

> *"He told them 'This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'" (Luke 24:46-49).*

That which took place on the Day of Pentecost in today's text would be the beginning of God showing his favour beyond Jerusalem and bringing salvation to the rest of the world. He does it through the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name *to all nations* - empowered by the Holy Spirit, and received in faith by the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit came, he gifted those gathered to speak in other languages (tongues). This wasn't some kind of out-of-this-world spiritual language that some Christians believe this passage to mean, but simply speaking the gospel in the languages of those present. Imagine being instantly able to share the gospel to Italians or the Chinese in their own language. That is what happened on Pentecost day in our text: "Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?" (v7-8)

In today's passage from Acts, Luke gives no room for the idea that the coming of the Holy Spirit is for the purpose of climbing the ladder of spiritual elitism or the sake of personal glorification. The Holy Spirit is, after all the third person of the Triune God, not a force or thing, not a product that can be captured or consumed, like people sometimes imply by shopping around for different churches to 'get more of the Spirit'. He is not a thing to be moulded into our own image but he wills to mould us, so that we increasingly conform to the image of Christ. That's why in our text the divine sound and light show with the mighty wind and tongues of fire is not the focus. They serve to bring focus to 'speaking the wonders of God; the proclamation of the gospel'. The key focus of our text is actually Peter's preaching. He proclaims that these events are a fulfilment of what the prophet Joel had said would happen hundreds of years before, culminating with God's promise that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

That is the purpose of Pentecost. With today's text from Acts, Luke shows us that the key concern for God in outpouring his Spirit on those gathered at Jerusalem is the proclamation of his saving help to all people throughout the world so that they might call on Jesus for the saving help - the forgiveness of sins - that they need. And this is what the people who were there heard. They didn't hear something unintelligible and other worldly languages, they heard the gospel in their own language. They could understand that all of God's saving work and favour from of old had pointed to and now culminated in Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension for them, and the whole world.

This message can only be proclaimed by or under the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Paul says in the reading from 1 Corinthians: "no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit". Peter can only preach his Pentecost Day sermon because he has first received the Holy Spirit from Jesus when Jesus commissioned his disciples for this task:

> "*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'*" (John 20:19-23)

But here on that first Pentecost day, there is something new. While not all of God's people are called to the public office of preaching and forgiving and retaining sins like Peter and the Apostles, *all* Christians *are* called to share the Good News of forgiveness of sins through Christ with all those they meet in their daily situations. God no longer speaks through a select few, like the Old Testament prophets, but all who receive the Holy Spirit are prophets through whom God speaks. All Christians are a part of the royal priesthood of all believers who will speak God's message to those around them. As the Spirit empowers them so they speak, just as Psalm 51 says: "*Lord, open my lips and I will tell forth your praise*". And so those people from every nation under heaven were able to announce the Good News of God's mercy, grace, forgiveness and blessing in Christ, in the languages of everyone present.

Not only is the Spirit at work in this proclamation of the Gospel, the Spirit is at work in hearing the gospel, opening ears and hearts and minds to receive it; creating faith so that those who hear Christ's saving work hear it and trust it for them personally. In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Luther said: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In his explanation to the petition "Thy Kingdom Come" Luther

explains: How does God's kingdom come? God's kingdom comes *when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word* and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity."

As God poured himself out in the Person of the Holy Spirit upon these people from every nation under heaven, a new 'first-fruits harvest' took place. These people were the 'first fruits' of God's harvest from all nations outside of Israel; the birth of the worldwide church.

So back to the great Pentecost question: "What does this mean?" - what does this mean *for you?* It means that if this had not happened, you wouldn't be sitting here today. You wouldn't know God's saving help and forgiveness for you in Christ Jesus our Lord. It means your baptism would be devoid of any power. But it isn't, because God has given you his Holy Spirit in your baptism, to give you faith in Christ and his death and resurrection for you. The Holy Spirit opens your mouth to call on the name of the Lord for your salvation. Since you call on Jesus, that is a sure sign you have received the Holy Spirit through God's word and sacraments as he has promised. He has already gone to work creating faith in your heart, although once dead and unclean in its natural state but now regenerated by the Holy Spirit to be dead to sin and alive to Christ. Now you can hear and believe the promise: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord *will be saved*". This is the summary of the glorious gospel that says even though we are sinners, God in Christ is a loving and gracious God who gave his life on the Cross to pay for your sin and rise triumphant over death for you. He continues to forgive sins through his absolution. Because you are right with God through faith in Christ alone, peace and favour from your Heavenly Father is yours forever. This is the same Good News he has called you to declare to your neighbours.

The church celebrates Pentecost 50 days after Christ our Passover Lamb rose from the dead. It is a rescue mission far greater than the Israelites marching through the Red Sea to freedom and the hope of their promised land. It is a rescue mission for the whole world. It is God's rescue mission that has secured *your* redemption, and he guides you towards the new land he promises you will enter—your heavenly homeland. There you dwell with the angels and God's first-fruits of his worldwide church; the saints here and now, and the saints who have gone before you, as well as all those who still to hear the Good News and believe. Together you will join in the victory celebration with God forever and ever. Amen.