

“The Mighty Works of God”

“We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11).

What comes to mind when you hear the word Pentecost? For some of you, it may be the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Others may think of tongues of fire or the disciples speaking in other languages as the Spirit gave utterance. The truth is, when we consider the story of Pentecost, our minds usually go to the miracles associated with the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the Church, but what I want you to hear today is that the meaning of Pentecost is not found in the miracles. The meaning of Pentecost is in the message of Pentecost. Let me say it again: The most important aspect of what happened in the Temple 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, and the essence of the Early Church, is not found in the miraculous acts of the Apostles, but in the message of the “mighty works of God.”

This is critical for us to understand, because so often in life, we look for meaning outside of this message. Some churches even make miraculous signs an essential component of their theology, holding up physical healing, speaking in tongues, or a “holy life” as the way in which God is present to them. As Lutherans, we believe that the Spirit works through the objective means of God’s Word and Sacraments, and that we need no special sign of the Lord’s action in our lives. And yet, even with this clear confession of Biblical teaching, sometimes the promise of God isn’t enough for us, and we find ourselves looking for external signs or internal feelings to validate what God has promised.

One of Satan’s most basic and dangerous temptations is that God’s promises are not enough, and that His Word is only part of the equation. And, as we get caught up with the world in the quest for an extraordinary spiritual experience, we can easily become discouraged, and we can quickly doubt God’s Word simply because we don’t “feel” a certain way or have some unique spiritual gift. The truth is that worship can feel mundane. And prayer can seem empty. Serving and giving to others can seem pointless. Faith can feel dry. And, in our human desire for extraordinary actions of God in the here and now, we totally miss the message. And, my friends, without the message, there is no meaning!

You see, the people on Pentecost were not changed by the supernatural sound of the wind, or the mystical tongues of fire, or even the Apostles speaking in different languages. The people on Pentecost were transformed by the message of “the mighty works of God.” You see, this message is the only place where true meaning is found, and this saving message of God’s mighty works began with a word from Peter that condemned them in their sin. In today’s text, we only heard the beginning of Peter’s speech, but as he goes on, Peter blasts the people with one of the most convicting sermons in the Bible. He tells them that the God they had come to Jerusalem to worship had kept His promise to send a Savior, that Jesus was that Messiah, and that in their sin, they had crucified Him.

Peter then continues by telling these condemned people that this Jesus was raised from the dead, and exalted by the Father, and that Peter himself and the other disciples were witnesses of these “mighty works of God” and, after all of this, Peter concludes his sermon by telling them that the miraculous things the people were now seeing were the works of the Holy Spirit, and the one to whom the Spirit pointed was Jesus, the very “Lord and Christ” whom they had crucified (Acts 2:36). And, by the time Peter had finished speaking these convicting words, the people in the Pentecost crowd were left with nothing to say and nothing to do and so they simply cried out to Peter and the Apostles in desperation, “Brothers, what shall we do?” To this cry for mercy, Peter simply pointed to Jesus: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:37-38).

Today, this detail is essential for us to hear because we are no less sinful than the Pentecost crowd who gathered in the Jerusalem Temple, and our need is no less urgent, and our situation is no less desperate than the people who crucified Jesus. The truth is, you and I are also responsible for the death of Jesus. It is our sin that led to His crucifixion, and even if you had committed only one sin in all your life, Jesus would still have had to die, or you would be lost forever. No one is without blame. No one's hands are clean. And the amazing truth of the Gospel is that even if you were the only sinner in all the world, Jesus would have died for you!

The message of "the mighty works of God" spoken by the disciples on the day of Pentecost was all about Jesus, and the message to which the Holy Spirit points on this day of Pentecost is also all about Jesus, the Son of God who, for us and for our salvation, left the glory of heaven and took on the flesh He created; who lived a perfect life under the unbending Law of God; who, for us and for our salvation, took on our sin and the sin of the world; who received God's justice and was punished in our place and gave up His life and on the third day rose from the dead; and who did all of these things to bring you back to God! And the lifesaving truths that we are tempted to dismiss as ordinary and tired church teachings are the "mighty works of God" that change everything!

My friends, because of what Jesus has done, you and I are reconciled to God. We are forgiven for the times when we have searched for meaning in the things of this world. We are forgiven for the times when we have disregarded worship and failed to give and serve our neighbor with joy. From these and all other sins, we have been cleansed, and as a result, God has recreated us in His image as new people, and He has promised us heaven. This is the message of the "mighty works of God," and today, in this message of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit has been given to you!

There is no doubt that God does extraordinary things in this world. The Pentecost account, and in fact, the entire book of Acts, is filled with amazing signs, and, even today, God performs extraordinary miracles in the lives of His people. But these gifts are always and only there to point us to the "mighty works of God" that have been done for us in Jesus. And that is exactly the job of the Spirit. On that first Pentecost, and in the life of the Church today, the action of the Spirit and the task of the Church is to point to "the mighty works of God" He has done for us in Christ.

By the Holy Spirit's power, you and I are bearers of the message of salvation. We carry with us the mighty works of God, and He has positioned each of us exactly where He wants us to fill the ears, eyes, and hearts of others with this Gospel. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak in different languages, and today, the Holy Spirit has given each of us the extraordinary ability to speak in someone else's language. It may be the language of a certain age group or culture; it may be the language of a specific vocation or experience; the truth is it differs for each of us and yet, we have all been placed into a unique circumstance, and as we live and work with the people to which God has sent us we have opportunities to declare to them "the mighty works of God" in their own tongue. And the saving results of this message are always miraculous. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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