"Are We Missing Something?"
Acts 2:1-18
May 23, 1999
The Day of Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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Are we missing something?

It's a question that runs in the back of our minds sometimes, especially around the festival of Pentecost. After all, we hear the story from Acts 2 of the birth of the Church with all of the excitement. We hear about the loud rushing wind, the tongues of fire descending on 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.

So are we missing something? After all, life at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church is never quite as exciting as that day of Pentecost, and we are tempted to be disappointed about that. Is there something that we're doing wrong? Have we somehow gone off course? There are plenty of people out there who would add to our discouragement by telling us that yes, we have gone off course; yes, we are missing something; and yes, we need to leave lots of "Lutheran" baggage behind and get back to the early church.

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

The day of Pentecost and the 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 us examine the text: When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

We go on to hear that there were in Jerusalem devout men from all sorts of nations. We hear that some mock the apostles, but Peter preaches to the crowd and declares that this Pentecost miracle is a fulfillment of prophecy in Joel. We go on to hear that many believe, and that 3000 are baptized that day.
It is quite a day, and quite a miracle performed by our Lord. Are we missing something from that day of Pentecost? 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. Nor are there tongues of fire dancing atop the heads of anyone in the room. 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 something special. 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 is loud rushing wind and fire.

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

For one thing, we have the Word of God—we have the Gospel of our Lord 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 in the New Testament—we have the Word of God. It was this same message that St. Peter proclaimed to the crowds that day; the same message that saved 3,000 that day is the one that is proclaimed here at Good Shepherd.

Do we have anything else? You bet! We have Holy Baptism. The same Baptism received by 3,000 that day is given to Paul Michael Roark in our second service today. It is the same Baptism that has washed away your sins. It is the same Baptism that grants forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

So, we don't have loud wind and tongues of fire. 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. Word and Baptism do.

But wait a minute. Am I being too simplistic here? I mean, after all, 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 24 units of instruction spread over the better part of a year. Surely this means something, doesn't it?

We are tempted to think so. We are tempted to believe that the Holy Spirit was acting stronger back then, or else that we're not making use of the Holy Spirit as we ought to be, that we're somehow squelching His work. (Or we may be tempted to think that we place too much of an emphasis on confirmation instruction.) But let us 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. This makes sense: Pentecost was a major festival, and any devout Jew who could was supposed to come to Jerusalem for worship. In fact, history apart from Scripture declares that the population of Jerusalem at such times would swell to hundreds of thousands, probably a million, maybe even more.

Who came to Jerusalem? Devout Jews, according to the text. This meant that these were men who were well-schooled in the Old Testament. They had been taught throughout their lives about the Word of God. They had been thoroughly taught the Law of God, and they had been well-schooled 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 preaches his Pentecost sermon, what does he do? He tells them the Savior's name. He declares that the Savior they have been taught about, the Messiah for whom they have 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 Savior, and He has accomplished their salvation.

These men have had more than a year of instruction; they've 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 wish to take away from the miracle of those 3,000 baptisms at all; each time someone is saved, it is a miracle for it is solely the work of the Holy Ghost. But think of this for a moment: If a million devout men are in Jerusalem, and 3000 are baptized, that means that only 3 one-thousandths of one percent of these devout men were baptized that day. This would receive criticism from many a church-growth author, who say that a phone-canvass should produce a 4% positive response.

What's the point to all of this? I suppose I'm trying to make two points.

The first is this: From a human perspective, missions have always been tough, often slow and difficult. St. Paul preached sometimes and many believed; at other times they stoned him, nearly to death. 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 the last puzzle piece to fall into place.

The second point is this: Whether mission work from a human perspective is easy or tough, 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, all for the sake of His Son who died for us. Some mission fields are fertile, while 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 the day's-or year's-always-changing statistical report, we have God's holy Word to tell us whether we are on track or not.

We don't have wind and fire. We do have Word and Sacrament, and that is 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 relief. 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 birthday of the Church. I hope that you do not receive this news as an attempt on my part to hide shortcomings, 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 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 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 just don't have 'it' like some other churches do." (Whatever "it" may be!)

And so we begin to grow ashamed of what we believe and teach 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 cast around, trying to find something that we can add or change in order to bring life to the church-or at least to change things so we're not so apologetic for doing what we do.

At times like that, we are 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 want to do whatever they are doing. We look at other churches that are growing faster and want to adopt their methods for growth, scriptural or not. We grow weary of being careful with doctrine and practice, and try to ignore our doctrine in the name of expedience. As the discouragement takes hold, we are less likely to involve ourselves in the tasks that need to be done 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 or 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 achieves in its first year or years; but how purely and rightly it proclaims God's Word and stewards His Holy Sacraments.

Could it be? Could it be that it is not our doctrine holding us back? Could it be that we are hesitant to believe and practice it, not quite "sold" that it is 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 children of God, 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, that people might hear and believe. Let us carefully preserve God’s Word in all its truth and purity, 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 truth and purity. This is the office of the pastor, for so God has ordained. 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, they go about their vocations. They work hard for their employers, in service to their fellow man. Parents take on the responsibility of teaching their children about Jesus—do not 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 (I Pet. 3:15).

This is the mission program of God, the evangelism program that He declares in His Word. If each of us truly rejoice in the means of grace and go 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 people of God, cast off all gloom and sadness. Do not be misled to be discouraged or ashamed of what we teach and practice here; if it is in accordance with the Word of God, then we have the blessing of our Lord. Let us not do wrong, and let us not fail to rejoice in what is right. For what happens here is exactly what happened on the first birthday 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 Sunday—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, "What has the Lord provided?" 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 not fail to proclaim it to all who will hear: for in this Gospel is life and salvation. Amen