

New Beginnings

Acts 2:1-21

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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We usually think of this passage from Acts as the birth of the church. We celebrate it as the time when God gave the Holy Spirit to believers, the same Holy Spirit we have today. But as usually happens when I dig deep into a passage, I found some things I hadn't really seen before. They have led me to believe that what this passage is about is a new beginning. Actually there are several new things here that add up to a totally new way for God to relate to the world, a very personal one.

In verse 2 we read that "there came a *sound* like the rush of a violent wind." The word there for "sound" can also be "roar," as in an animal's roar – like, say, a lion. Or maybe even a person. This makes it much more personal. God is, so to speak, "roaring" out an announcement about his presence. This is new: hearing God speak to the people in worship. It's important to pay attention to that possibility, because what happened next was the appearance of what looked like fluttering, flaming tongues. Tongues are of course very personal! And then there's this: the tongues, says our translation, "rested upon" each of them. The word here in the original has, when it refers to God, the meaning sometimes of "conferred upon," as in conferring power or wealth. Again, this is new: God is conferring some of his power on mortals. That power shows up in their sudden speaking in languages they never knew.

So it's very personal: God announces the event with a roar, and confers the gift of speaking in other languages on them. This is new: *They* are now the ones who work miraculous deeds, not God. The personal nature of it could almost seem like a commissioning. In fact, it probably was. The Holy Spirit empowered and allowed *them* to

be the ones who converted people, who brought people to God. What we have here is a new age: this is the beginning of the age of the Holy Spirit. Note how the people in the room “called out,” in a sense, to the ones listening outside. Did you know that the word for church, *εκκλησια*, means literally “the called out ones?” Unlike the synagogue, which waited for people to come to it, this new thing, the church, would call out to bring new believers in. This is the beginning of a new age, the age of the church.

Not that there wasn't some confusion about it all. You heard how some people thought they were all drunk on new wine. But the ones who were paying attention realized something new was happening. That's why they were asking, in verse 12, “What does this mean?” In fact, a better translation there might be, “What is this intended to be?” The answer came in verse 16. Peter quoted the prophet Joel concerning the “Day of the Lord,” the judgment day, and the same thought happens here. It should probably read, “rather, this is what the prophet Joel intended when he said” what he said. This incident is the beginning of the time of judgment. It is a different judgment! It is a NEW kind of judgment: God calls EVERYONE. The people inside couldn't see who was outside; so in essence, they were calling to faith everyone who could hear. This is really new! Judaism had always been a selective faith. This new faith of Jesus was for everybody.

In a very real sense, God's relationship to humankind was beginning again. A new age was dawning.

I say to you graduates: YOU are entering into a new age, a new beginning. Everything that has gone before is now just history; your reality has to be about looking

ahead. You have been living and working and playing under one set of rules, one way of existing; now, as you graduate, you step into a new existence, just as those Pentecost people were entering into their new existence. You are about to enter into a time of judgment, in a sense, because you're going on to a new world, whether it's college or work, where what you do does get judged, for better or for worse. That can seem kinda harsh! But it isn't; it's just the entry into a new age: the age of adulthood. You'll never quite know when you're "completely adult," not even when you turn 21; some of us take a long time to feel "completely adult." Some of us never get there! But you have entered that new age by virtue of staying the course, and completing your work over the last, oh, 12 or so years, for you high schoolers, a lot longer for you, Angelina! The biggest thing you've all learned, through all of those classes, and SOLs, and SAT preps, and for Angelina a lot of other high-end requirements, and everything you've all had to digest – the biggest thing you've learned is *responsibility*. You might not even have thought about it, but having to meet deadlines, having to make sure you do your preparatory work for class, having to make certain that when money was required for something, you made the arrangements and got it in on time – all these things have taught you how to be responsible. It's a good thing you've learned it, because you are beginning your age of responsibility – not just for yourselves, but for the world. My generation is fading away into retirement; your parents' generation is finishing up raising kids, we're all just working to get by. So we're not full of energy and new ideas like you are and will be. That's why the responsibility is beginning to fall to you. Does that sound heavy? It might – but there's a reason it shouldn't.

See, just like those Pentecost people, you're now empowered. God empowered them to go on and be his people. By virtue of your graduation, you're able to go on now in the direction you believe you're supposed to go, that you feel called to go. This is the beginning of the time when YOU will grow into leadership. Leadership, you know, is largely about *change*; leaders lead their people to do new things.

Just like those Pentecost people, YOU are going to be the ones who do miraculous things, perform awesome deeds. You don't know it yet, but you will. Those things might not seem so miraculous or awesome at the time pull 'em off; I think God keeps us from knowing that right away so our egos don't get too big. But you'll know, at some point, because God wants you to know. Those Pentecost people got encouragement every time they needed it, and so will you. They knew they had God on their side, and you should know that, too. I hope you high school grads can remember that, when the cold of November forces you inside, and those projects and final exams are looming. All of you, high school or college grads, know this: You've got God on your side! You can get through anything.

And you know why all of this is true? Because just as God conferred his power on those Pentecost people, God has conferred power on you. He's done it in many ways; he's done it by giving you family and friends that support you, and minds that are getting stronger and stronger all the time. He's also given you the power to love, and I tell you now, that's the thing that will cause you to do more miracles and rack up more awesome deeds than you can even begin to imagine. When you care about people, you do something about it. You're now growing into the ability to make that something

powerful. Who knows what you'll end up doing? It was said of those Pentecost people that they had "turned the world upside down." In the power of God, and the power of love, you will remake the world.

'Cause see, here's the thing: in your new beginning, as you go on to grow and love, humankind is beginning again. Oh, I know, that sounds like a big flight of fancy rhetoric, the preacher trying to wax eloquent. But in a very real and powerful sense, it's true; as you go out into the world and learn what you are supposed to be and do, the world is changed. With every graduating class, humankind gets another chance to get better. It's up to YOU, you who are graduates, to make sure it does get better, and to define the ways it does.

Can you do it? Do you have what it takes? Sure you do! – for all the reasons we just said, and one more. The story of those Pentecost people doesn't end with our reading for today, you know that. They were only beginning to experience the life God had in mind for them. They ended up seeing things, and doing things, beyond anything they could ever have thought they would see or do. Somehow, I think they knew, from that Pentecost day on, that God was going to walk with them throughout it all. I hope you know that, too. In fact, that's my prayer for you: that as you head off into this awesome new life you're just beginning, you'll feel God's presence with you, and you'll respond when he says: "Rejoice!"

I sort of envy you – I bet everybody here does a little! – because your brightest and best days are still ahead. I pray for you that you'll take the time to enjoy this

journey. It's what God wants for you; it's what we all want for you. So go with joy, and lead humankind into the new beginning it has in you.

Let us pray. Heavenly and yet present God, it's with a little sadness and a lot of joy that we come to this day. Sadness, because soon we will not see these graduates; they'll be on to the things you have in mind. Joy, because we have seen how you have worked your will in them, equipping them for this new beginning they're about to live. Help them to understand their new rules, their new existence, their new abilities. Help them to use those abilities in ways that truly do change the world. O God, we know that the world can be harsh at times; we know that each of these graduates enters now into that time of being judged and tested that can be frightening at times, depressing at others. Help them to know that no matter what judgments they receive, good or bad, they are always loved. Help them, we pray, to learn to share that love with the world, so that your new age, your new beginning, can become a reality through their hands. We're asking this in the name of Jesus our Lord, the greatest teacher of all, AMEN.