

## CHANGE OF HEART

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

At some point in my life, many years ago, as a fledgling preacher, I must have delivered my very first sermon—no doubt an enthusiastic attempt to bring the word of God to the hungry masses. But honestly, I don't recall when or where I did that. Maybe it was a preaching class at seminary, maybe it was my first internship at a church I served (they let me preach on occasion). I can't remember where, or when, or even what that first sermon was about. But I can tell you one thing with all certainty—that sermon was a dog.

At the time, I am sure I considered the sermon to be brilliant—inspired even—that it would be printed and reprinted and passed from church to church, that it was destined to be added to the Bible itself—placed between Thessalonians and Timothy. They would want to put it near the front, with the gospels, but I, in my humility, would say no.

But looking back over a quarter-century and knowing how young and inexperienced I was, I cringe at the thought of what I must have inflicted on those poor folk in the congregation. They are proof that Christian patience truly has no limits.

It wasn't just me. It is all of us newby preachers. I recall going to hear a classmate preach at his home church. It was the Sunday after Christmas—that one Sunday when seminary students are invited back to take the pulpit. (It is the Sunday that they can do the least amount of damage.) I was going to be in my friend's hometown for a family wedding so I attended his worship service. It was a large church, there was a good crowd, and my friend climbed into the pulpit and preached a terrible sermon. It was painful to listen to. The problem was that my friend had just completed an Old Testament course—a survey of the Old Testament. His head was full of critically important information that he was compelled to share with the congregation. If he didn't his head would explode. He was determined in that single sermon to regurgitate everything he had learned from Genesis to Malachi, 39 books, thousands of years of history and theology. Oh, and talk about Jesus, too.

My friend made a rookie mistake. Experience teaches you to weed out the extraneous and focus on what is important for that particular sermon. One day I hope to do just that.

I don't want to make too light of it, but preaching is a challenge. Sometimes we preachers hit a home run and occasionally we strike out.

Our reading today is a first sermon. The preacher in this case is the apostle Simon Peter—Jesus' right hand man. You know him as the leader of the early church. But he had to have a first sermon, and this is it.

In our Bible, the Gospels—all four of them—conclude with descriptions of the resurrection and Jesus' subsequent appearance to his disciples. The book which we call Acts of the Apostles picks up with Jesus spending time with his disciples and teaching them more of the kingdom of God and their mission in the world before he ascends into heaven. The disciples (as Jesus had instructed them) return to Jerusalem and wait. On the Jewish day of Pentecost, as they are gathered together, the Holy Spirit descends engulfing and anointing them all. The sound of the Holy Spirit is like that of a mighty wind. It appears as tongues of fire resting on the heads of each of the disciples. They are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Because it is Pentecost, Jews from all across the world are gathered in Jerusalem. The commotion of the Holy Spirit attracts a crowd to the house where the followers of Jesus congregate. They hear the disciples speaking in the many languages of the world and the people are shocked that they can understand these Galileans.

Simon Peter steps out into the street and begins to preach to the crowd. He quotes the prophet Joel saying, *In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*

Then, in a synopsis of the gospel story, he tells them: *Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.*

Peter's sermon concludes with the statement, *Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*

I want to be clear, those who are hearing Peter preach are not responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Most of them, likely, were not even present in Jerusalem at the time. This is a different crowd. This crowd made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. Jesus was crucified at Passover. It was the Jewish authorities and the Romans who were directly responsible for Jesus' execution. Those who hear Peter's sermon understood his indictment and are *cut to the heart*.

While they understand that they did not directly crucify Jesus, they do understand that it was through the sin of all humanity that ignored the words of

the prophets, the voice of God, and the presence of Jesus, and ultimately ended the life of the one decreed by God to be Lord and Messiah. It is their fault because they failed to recognize the gift in front of them. They comprehend their missed opportunity and they ask *what do we do?* Peter's instructions to them are that they must 1) repent and 2) be baptized.

Repentance is a subject we have covered many times before. To repent means to turn, too change. In this case, it means a complete reorientation of one's life to where Christ becomes the focus of all we do. If sin is to turn from God, then repentance is to turn toward God. In fact, in the next paragraph, we read how the community of Christians in Jerusalem spent their days together in worship and prayer. They ate together sharing their meals. They sold their possessions lived in community. *All who believed were together and had all things in common.* They lived Christ in their community. Those who came to Jerusalem from foreign countries returned home and they carried the promise of Christ across the globe. The church began to grow.

Peter calls the people to repent but also to be baptized. Baptism would be a public acknowledgment of one's renewed commitment to God. Be baptized, show yourself, show the world what you believe, where you place your faith. Don't hide your light under a basket; place it on the lamp stand for all to see.

The crowd hearing Peter are not bad people. They are religious people who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They know scripture; they know God; they seek to lead righteous lives. And they are righteous—at least on paper. They do the right things—they pray, they make sacrifices and give to the poor. They do what the Law of Moses demands. But they lack the whole-hearted emotional commitment to God. they are blind to God's gift. They have not repented and realigned their lives to put God at the center. They hear Peter tell of Jesus—a messiah sent by God, and sacrificed for all. Instead of being the savior for Israel, he is executed by Israel. Peter—filled with the Holy Spirit—pulls together the scripture and the prophets in such a way that the people understand the deficiencies in their faith. This realization is like a knife to the heart. They want to know what they must do to change.

Too often we, as Christians, get caught up in the busy-ness of church and work and family. There is so much going on. Occasionally, we lose sight of Christ in our lives. Our intensions are good but our direction is off. At times like this, pushed by the Holy Spirit, we need to stop and refocus, realign our lives to Christ.

Back to the scripture: because of the Holy Spirit which descended at Pentecost, the crowd that gathered around Peter hear his words. They are convicted by his message. 3000 people are baptized. Not bad for a beginner. Makes me a little jealous.