

“A Pentecost approach to Scripture”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
May 20, 2018

*Joel 2:1-11, 28-32 and Acts 2:1-21*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A couple years ago, a short video aired, showing a man walking into an office building with a gun. He storms past the secretary, approaches a man, and raises his gun. It's a terrifying moment that has become all too familiar in recent years. But there's a surprise. In place of a modern assault rifle, the man is carrying an old muzzle-loading flintlock musket, straight out of the American Revolution. He takes aim, fires, and misses, as smoke fills the air. As he begins the long, laborious act of reloading, everyone in the office flees. By the time he's finished, the office is empty. The video ends with the words: “Guns have changed. Shouldn't our gun laws?”

Regardless of your answer to that question (and I know it's a complex question), the video gets one thing right: a lot's changed since the US Constitution was first drafted.

Right now the Supreme Court is facing cases that the nation's founders never imagined: Should authorities be allowed to search cell-phone records without a warrant? Should a baker be able to refuse to make a cake for a same-sex wedding? Does a Facebook photo constitute probable cause? Can Microsoft, on the basis of digital privacy, refuse to share emails with the government?

Somehow, our Supreme Court Justices have to interpret and apply to modern problems a document that never conceived of machine guns, or airplanes, or Twitter—a document that for nearly a hundred years permitted slavery and for 133 years never considered that women could vote.

As I stand here, wearing a robe that would have once been worn by judges and legal scholars, I am reminded that every Sunday morning I face a similar challenge. You do too, every time you read the Bible.

Somehow, we're supposed to make sense of a document conceived thousands of years ago, in a totally different language, by a desert people who lived very different lives from our own.

What possibly could this archaic text say to us today?

That's exactly what Peter was wondering when he began to speak with the crowd gathered in Jerusalem. Here were people from all over the known world—from Egypt and Rome, from Arabia and modern-day Turkey, from Greek islands and northern Africa. Some came from bustling cities; others from sleepy villages. Some were rich; some were poor. They would have known the Hebrew Scriptures—though many probably couldn't read them. For all of them, hundreds of years separated them from the time when those Scriptures were first recorded. The Bible, in many ways, was as foreign to them as it is to us.

And now Jesus Christ has changed the world. He has upended everything. In dying and rising, Jesus has reconciled humankind with God through a totally unexpected act of grace.

How could Scripture written hundreds of years before any of this ever happened possibly help Peter and the crowd understand recent events? How could an *old* testament still possibly be relevant?

Hence, it was probably surprising when Peter started his first sermon—in fact, the first sermon of the church—with a quote from an old, minor prophet named Joel.

Written at least 400 years before Peter’s time, this obscure book of just three chapters in English (four in Hebrew) ostensibly had nothing to do with Jesus. It’s an apocalyptic prophecy about a plague of locusts that devours the land and causes starvation. By the second chapter, that plague has morphed into a metaphor for invading armies. The prophet tells Zion to sound the alarm and tremble for the day of the Lord is coming and near. It is a day of darkness and gloom, as a great and powerful army approaches, led by God to punish the sins of Israel.

Joel does promise hope, but it is far in the future, involving the return of a repentant people to their land. There, says Joel, God shall pour out God’s spirit on all flesh, and everyone who calls on the Lord shall be saved.

Peter looks at this old text about famine, exile, and the promise of abundance, and, in it, he discovers a story about what’s happening to him right now.

In telling that story, Peter describes the same disaster, the same fire and blood, the same dark night. He calls for the same repentance. He proclaims the same Day of the Lord and its promise of salvation.

But now instead of representing the punishment of God, these tribulations reflect the suffering love of Jesus Christ. Instead of the Lord’s day being “great and terrible,” it’s “great and glorious.” It is a day of grace, not punishment. And whereas in Joel, the Day of the Lord promises a return to power so that Israel can have vengeance on its enemies, Peter hears instead the promise of a power to forgive and save—even his enemies. For Peter, the pouring out of the Spirit is what empowers the disciples to tell the world the good news of Jesus and his love for them.

Joel was right, Peter says: the day of the Lord *is* about salvation. It *is* about new life. But it’s about new life *for everyone*. And that day isn’t far off; it’s right now. It’s today.

Isn’t it amazing how the same words can mean two different things to two different people at two different times, but still be grounded in the same word of God, the same promise of salvation?

Now, I'm sure we've all encountered people who have ripped Scripture out of context and used it for their own agendas. Some might argue that's exactly what Peter's doing. But if we are to believe the Book of Acts, something else has happened.

What's happened is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit—God's wisdom—has moved through Peter and helped him listen better to the Bible. The Holy Spirit was there when it was authored, and the Holy Spirit is there when Peter reads it.

He knows his interpretation is still true to the overarching principles of Joel's prophecy, and he also knows that it's consistent with the love and life of Christ. That's how he knows that he's actually listening to the words, and not imposing his own agenda.

What he's done is actually a very Jewish thing. Judaism has never understood the Bible as a static document. Throughout the centuries, Jewish scholars have wrestled with these stories, scribbling in their margins, composing reams of interpretations, building on their meaning.

This dream of an ever-unfolding Scripture is our answer today.

Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, presents us with a fresh take on how we should interpret and share the stories and messages of the Bible. In quoting and re-interpreting the Book of Joel, he gives us a model for how we too can engage Scripture and allow it to guide, inspire, and bless our lives.

Scripture is not stone. It is wind. It is fire. It is a living Word that compels us to perpetually re-examine its meaning, to dance with its poetry, and to dream of yet unconsidered purposes. It does this because the same Spirit that moves through us also moves through Scripture.

As it is written in Hebrews 4:12, "The word of God is alive and active."

If we listen to Joel and Peter, we will hear a story for today. It's a story of threat and suffering, and how God refuses to give up, but finds us—young and old, men and women, oppressed and free—and binds us together in a new and inclusive community as witnesses to God's overpowering and freedom-making love. It's a story about a hunger deep inside of us, about a hurt so bad we can't make it better, and how God finds us in the dark and feeds us with dreams and visions that can change the world.

Maybe this is a story about you and the hurt you carry and the dream God has for you. Maybe this is a story about the parents who sent their children to school on Friday, in Santa Fe, Texas, expecting them to come home. Maybe it's a story about the 10 empty chairs that now sit around 10 empty tables. And maybe it's a story about the youth marching all across the country, trying to tell the world their dream of safe schools and an end to gun violence.

Or, maybe this is a story about a broken history of two peoples—Israelis and Palestinians—divided by violence and suspicion, land grab and trauma. Maybe it's a story about Palestinians,

some of them children, one of them eight months old, mowed down by a fire of bullets, as they press against their cage. And maybe it's a story of Jews, Muslims, and Christians working together to forgive pain unimaginable and to dream of a future that affords sovereignty and safety to all who live there.

Pentecost is an old Word with new Meaning. It is sitting down with this book and listening, waiting for whatever is in us to speak to whatever is in this text. It's rolling the words over our tongue. It's reading different translations and interpretations. It's prayer. It's arguing back. It's hearing the cries of God's people today and listening for God's answer.

But once you hear it, please tell the world. Be its witness. For I promise you, you will hear something none of us have heard; you will dream a vision none of us have seen; and we need it. We need you. That is how an old Word becomes a new Word and saves us all. **Amen.**