

Euphoric with hope

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A pastor was having a difficult time reading the book of Acts because she kept thinking about the imperial context in which it is set. How is her/our understanding of the story changed if we keep in mind that Jerusalem falls well within the bounds of the Roman Empire?

When

the disciples ask Jesus, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6), we remember that Jesus’ Jewish followers were longing for a time of self-rule and religious-cultural freedom. Given this reality, it makes sense that Peter interprets the events of Pentecost in terms of the prophet Joel.

Joel

uses language of hearing, waking up and drunkenness—all motifs that we see reflected in the Pentecost story. “Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land!. . .Wake up, you drunkards, and weep. . .lament. . .be dismayed. . . is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God?”(Joel 1:1-20)

His

words remind me of Jesus teaching the disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” This wasn’t just a prayer for spiritual bread; these people knew about trying to find bread in a place of high imperial taxes and rampant poverty.

In the Pentecost story,

scorners guess that the people miraculously speaking and prophesying are drunk. In Joel’s prophesy, however, the drunkards are the ones who haven’t noticed that their land has been invaded by another nation. In Acts, the “drunk” disciples are prophesying salvation and liberation

with the rejoicing of their tongues, as King David did in praising God (Acts 2:26).

The disciples' drunkenness is not a drunkenness of denial but a euphoria of hope. What comes to them as *divided* tongues actually *draws together* people who have been scattered in diaspora. The miracle of Pentecost happens as they both speak and hear about God's powerful deeds. God rushes in with wind and flame to fill the entire house, but then bursts those house bounds by touching the crowds, which represent the larger "house of Israel," with the power of understanding.

They hear and are dismayed. "How is it that we hear in our own native language. . . what does this mean?" Miraculously, the divided tongues bring together those who have been divided. (Compare this to the prophecy in Joel 3:1-3.) It's helpful to read this Pentecost story in its entirety, going beyond the bounds of the lectionary verses and ending with "Therefore let the *entire house of Israel* know with certainty that God has made him both Lord (ruler) and Messiah (anointed and chosen), this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

Though humans crucify, God resurrects. Though humans divide and dominate, God communicates. God has the last word, and the word is wild. It changes everything. It rebuilds broken community. It breaks boundaries and enlarges the house. It makes possible understanding where before there was not understanding.

Then, as Joel puts it, justice prevails, and "the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk" (Joel 3:1-3, 18). That is the "glorious day" of the Lord that has the disciples euphoric with hope. They begin to live it, breaking bread from house to house and sharing their goods with glad and generous hearts.