

I wonder how many of you read the conclusion of a book before you work your way through the rest of the book? There is something about knowing the end that helps to make sense of the present. People throughout history and particularly throughout the church's history have been preoccupied with the end of the story, the end of human history and the world as we know it. Even today some folks spend a lot of time speculating about the end. They've created a series of books and films that feed your interest in the end. Billboards and signs litter the highways with warnings about the end of the world and the return of Jesus and what you must do in order to be ready for it. When I read those, I feel like I am being manipulated into some kind of fear that will result in moral behavior change. Jesus is coming so you better get your house cleaned up. What will he think of all your dirty laundry?

I would be lying if I didn't say that the early church wasn't interested in the End, and in particular, the return of Jesus. It was. Some of the early church had experienced Jesus and were overwhelmed with that experience and with the hope that the life of Jesus and his resurrection meant. Come back, Jesus, they prayed! "Maranatha" was the word. We can't stand to live without you. We aren't living in fear of your return, but expectant hope. Come back and bring the End, make everything right. We're still living in a mess.

Well, time went on, and Jesus didn't come back. The End didn't occur. And the church had to figure out what to do in light of the delay of his return. Some scholars think that Luke, who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, is writing to an audience that is feeling disheartened because of the failure of Jesus to return. Some folks at that time may have even been questioning the faith itself. Maybe it's all a hoax. Maybe nothing is going to get better.

Luke wants to reassure his audience. And he does so by giving them a different vision of what we would call "the end." And we see

that vision in today's special-effect saturated story in Acts. Jews from all over the place are gathered for a party in Jerusalem. They call the party the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. It was a time to celebrate both the giving of the Law and the harvest. During this party, wild things occur. A violent wind blows. Tongues of fire end up resting on what appears to be 120 early believers in Jesus. And then, filled with the Holy Spirit who was coming in the fire and the wind, these believers are able to speak in languages that are not their own. This enables the immigrant Jews who are gathered in Jerusalem to hear the good news in their own tongues.

You see, the good news of Jesus is for them, their situation, their context. The church's story begins with the awareness that our message must take on flesh, must meet people where they are. Our story starts with the realization that the Spirit leads us to learn the languages of other people. "Watu wengi wanasema kiswahili!" "Beaucoup de gens parlent Francais."

Maybe it worked in the past, but it will not work today. We need especially in these days to learn the languages of other people. I mean that literally, but I also mean if figuratively. We cannot be content just to speak our own languages, to keep talking out of our own little narrow contexts. We need to think about what it means to speak the languages of the other: the young, the old, the stranger, the immigrant, the hurting, the left out. When the Spirit moved, the church spoke in new languages, the languages of the other.

Now, in the Acts story, we are told that as the believers speak in other languages and as the other Jews who are gathered there hear their speaking, not everybody gets what is going on. Some folks cry out as you might expect: "These folks are just drunk." Why else would this wild stuff be happening? Alcohol makes people do some weird things.

But Peter clarifies what's happening. "This isn't about too much partying," he counters. "These people aren't drunk; it's only nine o'clock in the morning." Obviously, Peter doesn't understand the nature of alcoholism. People can be drunk at nine o'clock in the

morning, as well as eleven o'clock at night. But I digress. Peter says, "What's going on is what the prophet Joel talked about. "In the *last* days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." The arrival of the Spirit is for Luke, in some ways, the arrival of the End. So for Luke, the days of the church, the days we are living in are the end days, the end times. They have been going on for 2000 years! Luke's audience, all of us are living in the end times.

It's a strange view. The End has arrived. And if that is true, there is something urgent about these days. The end helps make sense of the present. One of the gifts of my job is that regularly I get to preside over the funerals of many people. Now, you may not perceive that as a gift, but it is to me because, regularly, I am forced to experience what the end tells me about the present. Regularly, the deaths of other people cause me to comprehend the urgency of the now. Through funerals I sense that I and you are living in the last days. This moment, saturated by the wind of the Spirit, is urgent.

Now admittedly, you and I live in a time when we are led to believe that everything is urgent. Oh my gosh! We've got so much to do. And our futures and our kids' futures depend upon our doing everything, exposing them to everything, getting them involved in every kind of activity. If people only knew how much we have to get done and how soon we must get it done!

It's this sense of urgency that sometimes prevents us from seeing what is truly urgent. The end has come, Luke says. Even the natural world notices the importance of this moment. Relying on typical apocalyptic language, Luke in quoting Joel talks about signs in the heavens and on the earth: the sun turning to darkness (we would call it a solar eclipse), the moon turning to blood (we would call it a lunar eclipse). Even the natural world is noting the arrival of the Spirit. The heavens and the earth are doing some end-time kind of things. It's as if they are a giant neon sign that is begging to get our attention. The Spirit of God is blowing. What in the end matters has come! Pay attention!

And pay attention to what the Spirit means for human community. In the last days, we are told, the Spirit is poured out on *all* flesh. *All* flesh. God's Spirit isn't reserved for the super-religious, the religious professionals, our kind of folks, the people who speak our language. No! The Spirit is democratically given to all. Nobody is left off the hook. All are included.

"Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. And your slaves, both men and women, shall prophesy." The arrival of the energy of God empowers both men and women. The vision of a Spirit-filled end pictures both men and women as being called and unsettled by God. I happen to think that this truth leads to a fullness in our ministry and proclamation.

Often men and women perceive and process life differently. They sometimes think differently. For some, that is a threat. I don't think it is. My marriage is a lot better because my wife and I are remarkably different. The church is more alive when the gifts of men and women are included. As a pastor, I have noted that in my work. Some of my female colleagues, because they are different and think differently, bring so many gifts to the work of the church that, frankly, sometimes I do not have.

"Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Oh, so often we dismiss the young. They don't have visions. They are too young for that. They are too naïve. And we also dismiss the old: why would they dream dreams? They're washed up. Not so, in light of the Spirit of God, the Spirit that continues to energize both the young and the old.

The arrival of the Spirit takes us to a vision of the End where both the old and the young are pictured as vital to our life together. The Spirit is poured out on both. One of the great gifts that this congregation can offer to our community is the wonderful diversity of age that exists here. And I personally believe that the future of this congregation must take into consideration the fullness of our community. We need to be open to the visions of the young and the

dreams of the old. The young are not without vision and the old are not washed up. They still dream dreams. When the Spirit gets hold of the young and the old, as our Psalm for today says, “we [together] are renewed.”

These are the last days, according to Luke. Now like Luke, I personally think we are in for the long haul. But the Spirit has come. The unsettling, life-altering, community-creating, diversity-loving Spirit has come and penetrates these days, making them phenomenally urgent. These days are days in which we are called to see and trust *what in the end* matters and what in the end is the vision of God for God’s people. We live now seeking what truly is urgent and what reflects God’s inclusive dream for all of God’s people.