

Pentecost

Pentecost: Another high holy day of the Christian calendar. Called by many the birthday of the church, Pentecost represents a passing of the mantle of sorts—from the Incarnate Christ to the ever-present Spirit, the reminder of the God within, the sustainer, the teacher, the strengthener. Pentecost is a day of celebration for all that God has done and is doing within the life of the church.

[Acts 2:1-21](#) & [John 7:37-39](#)

May 31, 2020



INTRODUCTION

Pentecost! Another day for stretching yourself. Another day for bringing some life into the sanctuary for worship. Of course, every time we gather as the people of God, there is life. But celebrations like Pentecost are opportunities for stepping out and going even further, trying to recapture the experience of being empowered by the Spirit for the task of building the church, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Pentecost is one day when such a

thing doesn't feel quite so outlandish, but it might just be within the realm of possibility—at least in the Spirit-breathed possibility.

Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival celebrating the first harvest of the growing season. Later, it became a commemoration of the giving of the land of Canaan to the people of Israel; and even later, it morphed into an observance of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. All these are important times of celebration, but nothing in those celebrations indicates the power that was unleashed on this day. It certainly caught the disciples by surprise. They were used to a low-key holiday (not like *Yom Kippur* or even *Rosh Hashana*), but instead found themselves in an encounter with God that literally blew them away.

This is a day for playing with fire, for opening the windows and letting the wind blow through. (Well, maybe not literally; the trustees might get nervous.) Certainly, offer something that suggests that there is power in what we are doing. Annie Dillard attempted to capture something of this power in her famous quote about worship in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

Why do people in church seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.

Annie Dillard, ***Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters***
(New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 40-41.

How can we capture an experience of power? How can the worship experience “enliven” the congregation? Because that is what happened; there was life given, life poured out, life shared in that Pentecost moment that caught everyone by surprise. This is a great day for something new, a song to learn as a congregation, a movement to do as we sing together. Bring a teacher to share this something new, encourage the congregation to step out of their comfort zones for just a little bit on this Pentecost celebration day. You can be assured that the disciples

who were spouting forth in languages they never knew before were outside their comfort zones! Sing in Spanish today. Our *United Methodist Hymnal* is full of songs we could learn, even if we aren't quite sure what we are saying. Find someone with some fluency in another language to pray something familiar, such as the Lord's Prayer, in another language. We can hear the rhythms of the prayer, even if the words are unintelligible. We might be surprised at how understanding comes. And even if understanding doesn't come, entering into that space where we aren't always in control of what is happening or our understanding of it, makes us readier to receive the Spirit when it comes.

Let there be red! Red is the color of Spirit and the color of flame. It is a reminder of that first startling presence that came and rested on them. Did you catch that, the resting? What does that mean? This amazing moment, this throbbing with power moment, is ... comfortable? It fits, somehow; it fits, and we are in the right place at the right time. So, send out the word, "Come wearing red." Give everyone red ribbons as they enter, drop red confetti when the worship begins, bind everyone together in red yarn, fly red kites. Do something dramatic, something memorable, something that might—let's be honest—upset some of those who gather as not being "proper" for church. We have tamed worship, tamed Pentecost, trying to be proper and reserved. There is a time and place for proper, and for calm and reserved. But Pentecost is not that time or place.

PREACHING NOTES

The Gospel text for Pentecost gives us a choice. There are two different readings from John's Gospel where the role of the Spirit is emphasized. Emphasized? Maybe it is better to say hinted at; suggested, even. And that's the problem with the Spirit; it is hard to nail down (pun definitely intended!). There is an elusive nature to the Spirit, and it seems intended to be that way. It is as if you have to live into it; you have to experience the Spirit; you don't simply understand it.

[John 20:19-23](#) is the Gospel text assigned for Pentecost Sunday in Year A, but the alternate Gospel text is [John 7:37-39](#). The latter text is one of those hints (actually it's an editorial explanation provided by John or whoever wrote the Gospel that bears his name). Jesus says, "'Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me... and drink.' As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living

water.” Then, because he could sense that there were furrowed brows upon all the readers and hearers of the text—or at least he assumed there would be furrowed brows (and not for the first time, mind you, there was that jaw-dropping conversation with the woman at the well), John provides an explanation: he was talking about the Spirit! The Spirit hadn’t come yet, because Jesus was still here. Oh, right. As if that explained everything. It is the Spirit that brings forth rivers of living water. Well, clears that right up.

Better to go with the [original text](#), don’t you think? This one is easier: the first post-Resurrection appearance to the whole group (almost the whole group; remember, Thomas wasn’t there). And Jesus pops in, teleports in, beams in, through locked doors, we’re told, and says “Peace be with you” — which we might translate as, “Calm down!”

John says it took Jesus many such appearances before the Resurrection began to sink in. We’ve still got the confrontation with Thomas and the beach breakfast to come. So, it was a startling moment, as we might suspect. “Peace be with you.” And Jesus showed them his hands and side, John tells us. But John doesn’t tell us what exactly Jesus shows. Did he show open wounds, or did he show that he was healed? Or did his hands and side look as if nothing had happened? Later, Jesus tells Thomas to put his hand “in” Jesus’ side. The Greek is “*eis*,” usually translated as “into.” So we assume it was a wound, something open, a scar that persists even into eternity. We probably shouldn’t really blame Thomas, who only wanted what everyone else had, a chance to see.

After showing them, Jesus then says “Peace” again. And he sends them: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” It’s not quite the “great commission” that we get from Matthew: *Just go*. But then Jesus equips them to go. He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” It is not quite the drama that Luke gives us in the Pentecost event (which we’ll get to in a moment). Jesus just breathes — and names the breath. He then tells them what they are supposed to do with it: Reconcile the world to God and bring grace to those who are separated.

Those are heavy responsibilities. Some read this as the authority to determine what is forgivable and what isn’t. Others see it as giving the disciples the means by which God’s forgiveness will be at work in the world. If we don’t do it, who will?

Who preaches from the Gospel text on Pentecost? This is the day we are handed the keys; this is the day the church is empowered to do the work that it was created to do. This is the whole “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” thing. We can’t do this without the help of the Spirit. We can’t do this without God’s hand on everything we do. We need Pentecost, if only to remind us that all we do is done by the power and presence of God.

So, we turn to Acts 2. That’s our story. We’ve been reading, and will continue to read, Jesus’ story. But this is our story—or God’s story woven into our story. That’s why we need Acts to grab hold of the story (except, it’s confusing too.)

The truth is, Pentecost is a difficult event to describe. Oh, you can tell the story or read the account, and there might even be an “oh, my” in the crowd; there might even be some “well, how about that” kind of responses. But in the end, it doesn’t really do much for us. In the end, it is about a one-time event that we look back upon somewhat wistfully. “Wouldn’t it have been cool,” we think, “back then things were different; God seemed closer, more real somehow.”

There’s a dynamic in the Bible stories that grips us. It is as though the barrier between this world and the kin-dom world is thinner somehow. It is almost as if all you must do is reach out your hand and then you can feel someone take hold. All you must do is be quiet enough, and you can hear a voice that calls your name. All you must do is ... well, take a look, or a read. See how present the Spirit is. See how close the kingdom is. Take a look at [Acts 2:1-21](#).

But that was then. Now, it is a lot quieter. Or a lot noisier. It is quieter on the divine side; noisier on our side. When was the last time that you were amazed and astonished by something that God was doing in your life? When was the last time that you were blown away by the presence of the Spirit? It seems like that sort of experience is left for others. For the heroes of the faith, or for those who profess a Pentecostal faith that seems wrapped up in signs and wonders and is woefully out of touch with how the world really works.

Is that what we are supposed to hear on Pentecost Sunday? That “slain in the spirit” and “speaking in tongues” kind of faith? Is this a call to live like that? Maybe. Or maybe there is something more.

Our story is in two parts. The first four verses tell of the coming of the Spirit on the little band of followers who had lost their way when they lost their leader. Only four verses function as the fulcrum around which the whole story of the church pivots. Before that, these twelve did almost everything wrong. They missed the point; they ran and hid; they got in the way; they didn’t score too well on the disciple aptitude test. Before this moment in the story, you just know that if Jesus was serious about leaving this whole church thing in their hands, disaster was sure to follow.

But then something happened—the something described in the first four verses of chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles. Something noisy, like a violent wind. A tornado, that sounded like a freight train roaring through the room. Something that gives a simple choice - get out of the way or get on board.

Then tongues, Luke says, tongues as of fire, divided, meaning coming from a common source but able to spread out, like a vine and its branches, reaching out to touch each one. And these tongues, these fire-like divided branches rested on each of them. Rested. Doesn’t that seem odd to you? Rested on each of them. Not dove right down to the core; not cut through to where soul and spirit meets, joints and marrow; not cleansed them like a purifying fire, washing them like fuller’s soap. The sound was violent, but the tongues rested.

And what was the result of that resting flame? What did it do to them or for them? Luke says they could speak new languages. When the Spirit comes, we can speak in languages that we didn’t even know we knew. Instead of languages of hurt and anger and revenge, we are fluent in forgiveness and reconciliation. Instead of limitation and doubt and anxiety, we speak hope and joy like natives. Instead of accusation and blame, love rolls off our tongues as though we were born to it, with a perfect accent as though it were a part of us.

The second part of the story is what spills out into the street. That’s when you know it is a good party, when you can’t contain it in the house. At the Pentecost party, the neighbors complained; there are those who wondered when the new language was spoken, what it meant. They were suspicious and afraid to risk

responding. “You must be drunk,” they hissed, “if you think this can be fixed, this can be forgiven. You are out of your mind!”

And maybe we are, we will have to admit. Out of the minds that kept us from speaking this language before. Out of the minds that wanted only revenge, that wanted only to lick wounds and pout in the darkness. We are out of our minds, because the Spirit drove us out. Drove us out into the wilderness of living in a world that sometimes hurts us, sometimes rejects us. But then the Spirit gave us words to say, a language to live out; and so, we do. In fits and starts, but we do.

At the Pentecost party, the neighbors complained; some were cynical and sarcastic; but others were curious. Some passing by wanted to join in; they were peering in the windows, hoping for some of what they were having. They were amazed; they were captured; they saw something beyond the surface — some of them did anyway. “We hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

But only some. Maybe things weren’t closer to God in those days. Maybe it just seems that way because they find a God excuse or a God explanation for everything that happens. Maybe if we decided to start looking deeper into everything that happens, we’d realize that the Spirit is closer than we realize. We think we are alone because we don’t hear the freight train, but the Spirit is resting upon us, close as a breath, close as a heartbeat.

The story in Acts, Chapter 2, is a reminder that the church is still important; the church is instrumental to the purpose of God in Jesus Christ; namely — as Paul reminds us — the reconciliation of the world. What is amazing is that we have been given the Spirit, not as a gift to keep to ourselves, but to use to remake the world into the kingdom. What is astonishing is that no matter how inept we feel at that task, the Spirit keeps resting on us as if we were the means of providing comfort, as if we were the place of divine hospitality, as if we were entertaining angels and didn’t even know it.

Pentecost still has something to say to us. It is a word of comfort and a word of inspiration, a call to action, and reminder of a presence. Then the real question is, “Whether because of Pentecost, do we have something to say to the world?”