

## *Pentecost*

<sup>CEB</sup> **Acts 2:1-21** When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

<sup>5</sup> There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. <sup>7</sup> They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?" <sup>8</sup> How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?

<sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!"

<sup>12</sup> They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" <sup>14</sup> Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words!

<sup>15</sup> These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! <sup>16</sup> Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup> In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. <sup>20</sup> The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. <sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

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In the book, *The Path of Celtic Prayer*, Calvin Miller makes some interesting observations about how we tend to relate to the three aspects of God that we call the Trinity. "We generally thank God the Father for the big stuff: sunrise, rainfall and the Rocky Mountains. We are also prone to ask him to protect us from . . . hurricanes, earthquakes, and the like." We generally talk to him about the weather, stopping the Asian flu, or feeding hordes of starving people. Many of us are more inclined to talk to Jesus about personal issues – our income, our toothache, or family matters. Jesus seems much more approachable than the Father. "We would never sing *What a Friend We Have in God*. Jesus is our friend." The Holy Spirit gets slighted. We have no mental picture of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is invisible – amorphous and cellophane. Jesus takes care of our personal stuff. God takes care of the Grand Canyon. And the Holy Spirit gets honorable mention at Communion and baptisms." And, I might add, at Pentecost.

So what was Pentecost? The word is a Greek word meaning 50<sup>th</sup>. The Jews knew it as the Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22, Deut. 16:10) and it was celebrated fifty days after Passover. Originally, the celebration was about the first fruits of the wheat harvest and under Mosaic Law, the first grain that was harvested belonged to God. The Jews were under obligation to celebrate this feast and the crowds in Jerusalem would have been huge. Over time, the focus of this religious holiday changed. Before the time of Christ, the holiday had become centered on remembering and renewing the covenant God made with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17). Then, after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, the holiday came to be focused on the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Christ's followers had walked with Jesus for up to three years. Then he was arrested and executed. The disciples were devastated and afraid. Then they were astounded when the

resurrected Jesus appeared to them. It's hard to imagine their relief and their feeling of wonder. But then Jesus ascended to heaven and left them. Again they were alone, but he had promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen them. So they waited.

The account in the book of Acts about this particular Pentecost tells about an astounding event. As the disciples were gathered together that day, the house was filled with the sound of a howling wind and what looked like divided tongues of flame rested on each person. Wind. Was this the same wind, the breath of God, the Spirit of God that blew across the face of the waters in the Genesis account of creation? Once again, was the *pneuma* bringing something to life? Oh, yes indeed! The fiery tongues are unfamiliar to us. But in the first century there was a Roman coin on which divided tongues of fire appeared over the head of Caesar, signifying royalty or even divinity. People of that time understood the significance of fiery tongues resting on people.

Often, when considering this passage in Acts, we focus on Peter: Peter who denied even knowing Jesus, Peter who was quick to condemn Judas and then to replace Judas. And on Pentecost, the Spirit that breathed life into dust and created a human being, now breathes life into a cowardly disciple and creates a new man, bold in speech. But in paying so much attention to Peter we can overlook that the events of that day were not about an individual, but about a community. This is not about an interior, purely personal change. All of the disciples had tongues like fire resting on them and they all began to speak in foreign languages. There's a little play on words here. Experiencing the tongues like fire, they began to speak in foreign tongues. This isn't about the ecstatic speech that we call "speaking in tongues" today. That's *glossolalia*, speech that no one understands. But on that Pentecost day, the disciples were speaking in foreign languages, the languages of all the foreign visitors in Jerusalem for the feast. The Spirit enabled the church to go public with the good news, to attract a crowd.

It was a phenomenal day. For Peter, it called to mind the message of the Lord that the prophet Joel delivered. "I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. <sup>29</sup> In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves." And indeed, God's Spirit infused those disciples of Jesus. The Book of Acts goes on to tell how over the next few decades the Spirit of God enabled them to speak boldly, to cross the Jewish- Gentile barrier, to travel the known world, to cross gender barriers, and to undertake radical economic sharing. They were a community that was filled with the Spirit of God and they boldly did new things, astounding things. Rather than avoiding everyone who wasn't a Jew and seeing them as foul, unclean, and contemptible, the early Christians quickly came to reach out to Gentiles with the love that Christ had taught them. Rather than being second class humans, women became important leaders and teachers in the early church. Masters came to understand that their slaves were their brothers and sisters before God. And the barriers of class and economic position were erased as those with economic means shared with the poor in radically generous ways. As Joel put it, God poured out the Spirit on everyone and the ancient command to love your neighbor as yourself was unleashed in fresh and vigorous ways. The kingdom of God was breaking into history. All through Acts the church crossed cultural barriers into areas far beyond its comfort zone.

The Bible doesn't have one unified description of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit on Pentecost was an overwhelming, spectacular, "in your face" event. But there are far more passages in scripture where the Holy Spirit is more gentle breeze than howling wind. Most of the early Christians were never forced into boldness by an irresistible Spirit. Rather, they were tempted to do good, enticed to love others, and inspired to see possibilities where culture saw barriers. Moments of empathy, urges of compassion, clearly seeing people that they had always overlooked, and

thousands of other whispers of the Spirit urged the early Christians to acts that were outrageously counter-cultural.

That Pentecost was long ago and far away. What does it have to do with us? On a global scale we see horrible violence along racial and cultural lines, violence caused by impoverished desperation, by greed, and by lust for power. And often, religion is used as the justifying cover to hide the actual sinful motivations involved. The world is too reluctant to use diplomacy and too quick to use war in all of its variations. Two thousand years ago, inspired by the Spirit of God, Christians changed the world by seeing and living a vision of God's kingdom on earth. It is time for us to listen to the voice of the Spirit again and to be God's light in a dark world.

It's said that all politics is local. All change is local, as well. And our local culture needs to be challenged by a Spirit inspired church. The divisions between rich and poor nations are also found in the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in our own nation, and in our own community. We know more about the quality of the football program than we do about the quality of the education at the college level and even at our local high school. We live in houses that become silos, insulated from the world around us, windows shut to keep the heat or the cold out, seeing the world through our computer, TV, or phone, getting our news from whoever will tell us what we want to hear. Even our churches are becoming more and more isolated from each other. The independent congregation that may not even use the word church on the sign, gathers like-minded people to affirm their sameness and declare it good. And even within the same congregation, it's easy to just be close to those your age, or those that resemble you and your circumstances.

Pentecost calls us to move outside our shell, outside our clique, outside our comfort zone. Pray to open your hearts to the Holy Spirit, so that the scales will fall from your eyes and you will have ears to hear the exciting urging of the Holy Spirit. Pray for inspiration, for insight, for boldness so that you will find new ways to truly love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,  
Hear the message of Pentecost  
Welcome the Holy Spirit  
Boldly cross the barriers of culture  
To love your neighbor as yourself