

## **Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7)**

Over the past weeks, we dealt with Paul's writings to churches that have apparently come under the influence of those teaching a law-observant Christianity. They argued that: to be properly Christian, one must become properly Jewish, including for males, the rite of circumcision. To convince his readers of the folly of this "other gospel," Paul argues that law observance was always intended to be an interim chapter in the long story of God's interaction with humanity. With Christ's death and resurrection, a new chapter has begun.

Seven weeks after Easter each year, Christians celebrate Pentecost. Like so many of our Christian traditions, Pentecost has its origins in Judaism. The Feast of Pentecost is one of the three main feasts celebrated in the Jewish year. Occurring fifty days after Passover, the feast was originally designed to offer God the first fruits of the new grain harvest, "a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the LORD your God." It celebrated the completion of the spring harvest and commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

The feast included: "you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you," and was based on remembrance "that you were a slave in Egypt." The Old Testament Pentecost remembers and embodies the story of God bringing people out of slavery into their own land with their own harvest and bounty.

Both Pentecosts originate in experiences of God's gift of new life in a world in which the potential for oppression, violence, and death constantly lie close at hand. According to Jewish tradition, the Law was also offered to Gentile nations, but only Israel accepted it.

So, Pentecost reminded the people of both the universality of Israel's God, and the particularity of Israel's relationship with God.

For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus some fifty days after Easter, fulfilling a promise made by the risen Christ. The result was the beginning of the post-Easter mission of the early Christian movement.

The Christian story of Pentecost, found in the Book of Acts, was written near the end of the first century by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The story is filled with richly symbolic language drawn from the Jewish tradition.

According to the Acts story, the apostles had already gathered together in order to celebrate the feast. Suddenly they heard a “mighty rushing” wind come from heaven and fill the house where they were assembled. Next they saw what appeared to be tongues of fire rest on each one of them. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they began speaking in languages they did not know. The wind along with the sound of all the different languages, drew a “multitude” who stood amazed as the apostles told them of the wonders of God, in their own native tongues.

In the Hebrew Bible, “wind” and “fire” are both associated with the presence of God. In Hebrew, the same word is used for both “wind” and “spirit,” as in the creation story where the divine wind (or spirit) moves over the primordial waters.

Fire is an image for the divine presence, as in the story of Moses and the bush that burned without being consumed. Just as it was at the beginning of creation and in the history of Israel, the Spirit of God was again at work, creating the new community of the church.

The gift of tongues in Acts is not an ecstatic display that leaves the many excluded from the spiritual experience of the few; rather, the disciples speak in foreign languages so that native speakers of those languages may hear the good news of Jesus Christ addressed to them directly and come to be

included in the number of believers and followers.

For Paul, speaking in tongues, as opposed to foreign languages, is one of the gifts of the Spirit, and is unintelligible speech. To quote from Paul in I Corinthians, "Those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people, but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit." This practice continues among some Christians today – Pentecostals or Charismatics. Speaking in tongues is unintelligible praise and prayer "language" addressed directly to God, and is **not** understood or translated by anyone else.

But in Acts, speaking in tongues at Pentecost was very different. Its effect was the opposite: Jews in Jerusalem from the many different countries and language groups of the Jewish diaspora understood, each in their own language, what the followers of Jesus were saying. They marvelled: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" Rather than being unintelligible speech, it was supremely intelligible.

So, when we think of Pentecost, we think of fire and wind and the onslaught of a violent storm. We think of speaking in tongues and that unusual experience of "foreigners" hearing and understanding the "noble things of God" without the assistance of an interpreter. But there is much more to Pentecost. Sometimes we get so involved with the mysterious details of Pentecost that we miss the greater meaning.

In Galatians, God sends the Spirit so that those who receive it may address God in the most intimate of familial terms ("Abba, Father") and know God as Jesus knows God.

The continuing presence of the Spirit is the life of the risen Christ, shared with the church for the sake of the world. Both the identity of the Spirit and the Spirit's work are specific. Christ's living presence is knitting human community back together and bringing humanity back into a relationship of

love and familial commitment with God. In John's Gospel, Jesus breathes the Spirit onto his disciples so that they may continue his work.

The reality is that the Holy Spirit moved the disciples from sadness to joy and from survival to renewal. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' followers at Pentecost. That implies that the meaning of Pentecost is that Jesus is forever present!

Following the ascension, Jesus was gone. The incompetent followers of the now-departed Jesus are in Jerusalem where they plan to participate in the Festival of Pentecost. These followers have no clue as to how they will carry out Jesus' last directive "to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth."

Abruptly, as unpredictable as a tornado, Jesus is present with them. Mysterious and powerful, he's alive and near. The followers speak of this energizing invisible presence as the Holy Spirit. The same God who moved and worked through the earthly Jesus continues to move and work in the present.

The identity of the Spirit is specific and specifically tied to the identity of the risen Christ. The Spirit's work is to draw humanity into a relationship with God like the one the Father and Son share.

In popular culture, "spiritual" is a generic term that describes any mystical experience or ethereal sense. It is almost as if the more unknown or unknowable a thing is, the more the word "spiritual" applies to it. But in Acts and Galatians, the Spirit that Jesus shares with his followers is his Spirit, his life. It is known.

Testimonies about its power for healing (in Acts) or its capacity for prayer (as in Romans or Galatians) make it clear that the Spirit is the risen Christ's own living presence, available to his followers even while he is physically absent from them.

This was beautifully expressed by a biblical scholar who said, "Pentecost's consequence was that Jesus became alive again, and powerful, and forever thereafter present, wherever two or three are gathered in His name" and "Jesus was no longer a has-been." Christianity could not have survived for long solely on the strength of its historical memories of Jesus of Nazareth.

Explaining why she found prayer so difficult, a woman stammered, "It's just that Jesus seems so long ago and so far away." It's astounding that Jesus has not been forgotten. After all, he lived a very short time in a backward part of the world, so very long ago. He wrote no books and left no pictures. He shied away from all publicity. Even after his miracles, He would whisper, "Don't tell anybody." He died on a lonely hillside between two thieves, and even His resurrection occurred rather quietly. Thus, every day Jesus is ignored or denied or overlooked by countless numbers. So why has he not been forgotten?

The only possible explanation is the activity of God through the Holy Spirit. What happened 2,000 years ago is made contemporary by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes the manger, the cross and the empty tomb all relevant to us today.

Pentecost also means the church community is empowered! This empowerment occurs in the community's "coming together." Luke reports that "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." Were they all there? Yes. Were they all together? Yes. Were they all in one place? Yes.

This community context is also mentioned in Acts where the followers of Jesus are said to be "all united in their devotion to prayer." Jesus had invited his followers "to stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." It is almost as if being together in the context of community, ready and expectant, provides the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost was a communal experience, and it was only because they were

together that "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Following the original intent of the feast of Pentecost, which was to offer to God the first-fruits of the harvest, the Apostles offered the first-fruits of their ministry that day. They would go on to lead many more to Christ—in other nations and among other tribes and tongues. Their work would not have been possible if it hadn't been for the supernatural equipping of the Holy Spirit.

The church remains empowered individually and as communities. Acts speaks of "all" being together and "all" being filled with the Spirit as well as "each one" upon whom the Spirit rested. The same can be said for those who heard them – the large group of individuals from every nation who each heard testimonies in their own languages and who responded both personally and en masse. The Spirit acts at every level. We can be confident that whether we bear witness to only one or to thousands, in a small room or an arena, on street corners or country roads, it's the same work of God, generated by the same Spirit, making real the presence of the resurrected Christ.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit blows where it wills, it is clearly in the direction of community building. The Spirit blows in the direction of overcoming divisions, removing the barriers that separate people and bringing them together. "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. All are one in Christ." Wherever community building is taking place, there we find the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, being in community, ready and expectant, gave birth to the church. Next, we see this empowerment in the community "going public." This is one of the main points of Acts. Jesus had been raised from the dead, shown to be Lord and Saviour, but nobody knew how to talk about it. And few possessed the courage to speak of it. But then at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended and people began to talk to one another and then to those on the

streets.

We believe in Jesus Christ and much of what goes along with him, but when it comes to speaking of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, we hesitate. Oftentimes, our robust shouts fade into quiet whispers. We are familiar with the Holy Spirit's name, and we know that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. But can we confidently say, "We've got the Spirit?"

Yes, what happened at Pentecost can happen to us. On the night of the crucifixion, it was Peter **near** the fire. He followed from afar and warmed himself by the fire. Then it was Peter **in** the fire when he failed to live up to his boast and denied his Lord, and got into trouble. But on the day of Pentecost, it was Peter **on** fire, empowered by the Holy Spirit to courageous witness. And we are told that what happened to Peter happened to all the disciples. And, yes, it **can** happen to us.

The Church remains linked to fire: the pillar of fire that guided Israel through its Exodus nights, the cooking fires essential for feasts to which all – men, women, children, slaves, strangers, orphans, and widows – are invited, and the cloven tongues of fire still resting upon the church and sending us out with other languages into ministries we never imagined.

A large number of new members were received into a church and were asked what brought them to this particular church. Several answers were given— newspaper advertising, hearing the services on radio or television, the minister, the youth program, the music, and so on, but by far, the largest number said, "I came to this church because of a personal invitation from one of the members."

One of the real miracles of Pentecost was not so much the speaking in foreign languages, but the **listening**. The listeners **heard** about "God's deeds of power" in their own multiple languages. So, Pentecost was a powerful miracle of **hearing** as well as speaking. This should also speak loud

and clear to the contemporary church, in a biblical, relevant and vital way. The Gospel message should address the people where they actually live, and speak to them in languages or ways that they can truly understand, and move them to ask the question, "What does this mean?"

Once there was a young man who was puzzling over the nature of God. The question burned in him: "What is God like?" He just had to know. So he went to a monastery on the edge of town. When he entered, he saw a wise old monk sitting at a table and writing in a book. The man asked the monk, "What is God like?" The old monk looked up from his book and replied with feather gentleness, "It is Lent now. I'm accustomed to refrain from talking during Lent. But take this book. If you read this at the right hour, it will tell you what God is like."

He couldn't wait to bring it back and share it with his wife. Back home, she was not as excited as her husband about the book, because her mind was on their first child that she was carrying. "What did he mean by 'at the right hour?'" she asked.

He didn't know. They began to speculate. Maybe at noon on Good Friday. Maybe after the Easter Vigil. Maybe at the moment when they were in deep distress. Perhaps they should wait for God to reveal to them the right hour. It could even be years from the present. They decided they'd better wait for a sign.

Two weeks later their first son was born. How could he explain what it was like? First the worry, then-that child. He was a father. You grow up when you become a father. When he looked at his child, he was proud. He knew he was somebody. And yet humbled. He scarcely knew how to hold him, much less to bring him up. He used to think that he had it all figured out, but that child was bigger than the father. That night the child appeared to him in a dream. "What is God like?" he asked.

That did it. The father got up and reached for the book. He brought it to his



wife and told her, "This is the right hour. We'll open it now." He opened it at random and read, "It's very simple. God is a father." His wife opened it again. She read, "It's very simple. God became a little child."

"Let's open it again," he cried, "together." He took her hand. She opened it, and they read, "It's very simple. Each breath you breathe is the breath of God."

Pentecost means that a new wind of mission work is let loose upon the earth. Pentecost means that God is empowering the church to reach out "to offer them Christ." At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit shoves the church from the safety of locked doors in the Upper Room into the struggles and realities of the world's needs and meaninglessness without Christ.

There was a little Christian lady named Ethel Young. Every Sunday for 25 years Ethel went to the City County Jail to teach the prisoners their Sunday School lesson. It didn't matter to her whether these prisoners had committed a major or a minor crime, whether they were black, white or whatever. Every Sunday for 25 years she was faithfully there. Then one Sunday Ethel had to miss Sunday School because she was ill. During her illness she received many get well cards, mostly the store-bought kind. Ethel showed her pastor one of the special handmade cards she had received. When he opened it, there written in the messiest handwriting he have ever seen were these words: "We miss you very much." Signed, "Your boys at the City County Jail."

As God's people we are to share God's story in languages and in ways that people who have never heard it can understand.

Come, O Holy Spirit! Do it again!

## **PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE PENTECOST - JUNE 8, 2025**

Come, Holy Spirit,  
Ever living and ever-loving God,  
We praise you for your loving presence with us.

Come, Holy Spirit,  
Take and transform our societies — that broken people find healing; that lonely people find love; that bitter people find peace; that unhoused people find shelter; that fearful people find hope.

Come, Holy Spirit,  
Take our world's leaders and governments and bring renewal — that communication can be open; that building and rebuilding trust and respect is the foundation on which negotiations, commitments and decisions are grounded; that relationships between hostile people and hostile nations will evaporate; that conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, Sudan, Haiti, Congo, and many other places cease. May you lead us to lasting peace and healing.

Come Holy Spirit,  
Lessen the fear and bring hope to the thousands across Northern and Western Canada who are fleeing due to wildfires. We pray for the protection of those who have to evacuate these areas as well as those on standby ready to leave at a moment's notice. May they be kept safe on their journey and may those who have lost homes and property be supported by those who are able to provide shelter, prepare meals, care for pets and offer comfort.

Come Holy Spirit,  
Bring justice to the many whose hunger for food is felt. We feel the heaviness of what is happening in Gaza where aid distribution sites have been closed and at least 27 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire close to the distribution centre. Our hearts often feel the most burdened for the innocent on both sides who are affected by this ongoing war. We remember in our prayers this week, the pregnant mothers and infants in Gaza who experience the worst of this tragedy. We pray for their safety and health. We lift up Sudan, where five were killed in an attack on a UN Aid Convoy. We pray for those who did not receive food because of the disruption.

Come Holy Spirit,  
Support all who celebrate Pride this month in some countries in the world (including the U.S., Canada, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Germany and the UK.) We

pray for members of the 2SLGBTQ IA+ community in 67 Countries around the world where it is still illegal to love someone of the same sex, as well as at least 9 countries where there are explicit laws targeting transgender, non-binary, and non-gender-conforming people. We pray for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who have to flee as refugees to safer parts of the world. And we pray protection for those who have lived in traditionally affirming and supportive countries, which are now threatened by coming new legislation.

Come, Holy Spirit,

Fill your church — that our worship will be ever more pleasing to you; that prayers will change our minds instead of trying to get you to change yours; that our lives will make a real difference to real people in the real world.

We pray for Pope Leo XIV; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, acting Anglican Primate Anne Germond; the United Church of Canada celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary; congregations and Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, Bishop Azar and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; Doris Bieberdorf serving on a Mercy ship off the coast of Africa; Chetwynd Shared Ministry in Chetwynd, Christ Lutheran in Chilliwack - Rev. Dean Andersen; our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. Bless all these ministries and the pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians and volunteers who support them.

Come Holy Spirit,

Support our families, friends, and neighbours, and those who are alone. We pray for those who are separated from loved ones, those who grieve this day. We pray that you comfort the Voigt family, especially Pastor Jim Voigt and his children as they mourn the death of his wife. We pray for those who are sick in hospital or ill at home. We lift up to you this day, and all whom we name in hearts. May they find your healing mercy and love.

Come, Holy Spirit,

fill our lives with your presence — so that more and more every day, all that we do and say and hope will be an act of worship to you and an expression of love to others, to the glory of your name.

**Amen.**

**Our Father ...**