

Newly There!
Pentecost
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[Acts 2: 1-21](#)

James Howell, a Methodist pastor, tells this story from when he was newly ordained and living in a parsonage next to the church building. He answered a knock at the door one day to find a lady at the door, smiling broadly. “Is that the Methodist church?” she asked. “Yes, it is.”

“Is this the parsonage?” “Yes ma’am.”

“Well, I really need to speak to the minister. Is your father home?”

Oy. Sometimes, the assumptions that people make... but I’m getting ahead of myself. It turned out that she was asking James, now recognized as the pastor, to advertise an event at her church, in the next town over.

“It’s going to be so exciting. The Holy Spirit is going to be there. I want your people to come at 11 on Sunday!”

“But we worship at 11 on Sunday morning!”

“Oh, this is different. The Holy Spirit will REALLY be over there with us.”

If there were ever a time for the double-facepalm, that would be it. But it does bring up an important point – when we say “May the Holy Spirit be with you” or “Cousin Robin is filled with the Spirit!” – or even when we pass the peace to one another, saying “The Peace of Christ be with you” – are we tacitly saying that the Spirit can only be with one person at a time? Are we handing out pieces of peace? Surely not. But we certainly do act that way at times.

It’s important on this Sunday – Pentecost – that we remember that the Spirit is not limited. You’ll often hear people say that this is the celebration of the Spirit descending – as though the Spirit came among humans just that once, and then popped back out again, just to see what we would do. The so-called, “Shy Person of the Trinity.” Except that the Bible is full of the Spirit at work – and we can see the Spirit at work in the world today, too.

The first mention of the Holy Spirit in the Bible is in Genesis 1: “And the breath of God hovered over the waters.” (Remember that in Hebrew and in

Greek, Spirit and Breath are the same word. *Ruach* and *Pneuma*, for those that like to hear how they sound.) In the famous story of Ezekiel and the Dry Bones, we see this breath of God, this Holy Spirit being breathed in by dead bones – who then get up and move around, being fully alive in the Spirit. In the New Testament, even after the Pentecost story, we see Paul describing the Spirit as “bearing the unspeakable to the indescribable” and that the groaning of creation (and ourselves as part of creation) are all heard by the Spirit, who is right there, in the midst of rebirthing us. If you come to church today, and take nothing else away with you, take this message: the Holy Spirit is not “shy,” but constantly active, as your companion and guide.

So, what’s this Pentecost thing all about, then – if it’s not the only time the Spirit is active, what are we actually celebrating? Pentecost comes from the Greek for fifty days – Pente-koste – and was the Greek name for the Hebrew “Festival of Weeks” or Shavuot. The Festival of Weeks is celebrated fifty days after Passover – and is a time for celebrating the “first fruits” of the year, and the giving of the commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This is why the disciples are gathered together in Jerusalem – and why there are so many people from around the world in the Acts 2 story. This was the festival that was at the easiest time of the year for travelling in Israel.

In the Christian tradition, this festival of 50 days became 50 days after Easter Sunday – and the celebration of the formation of the church. Protestants like us tend to decorate in red – and play up the joy of the Spirit with a birthday party for the Church. Pious Catholics are encouraged to fast the night before, and celebrate three feast days – while the Orthodox are expressly forbidden from fasting for a full seven days!

Pentecost, then, is a celebration of the Holy Spirit – the person of the Trinity that represents how God works in ways that surprise and inspire. Since the word for Spirit and the word for Wisdom are both feminine in Hebrew, the Holy Spirit is now lifted up as evidence of God containing both feminine and masculine elements – though that’s a sermon for another week, I think.

In the Acts story of the first Christian Pentecost, the Spirit descends like “tongues of fire” – and then the disciples start speaking in the languages of

everyone gathered for the festival of Shavuot, telling the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. There's a rare pun in this passage that works in both Greek and English – "Tongues as of fire descended... and [the disciples] began to speak in other tongues." Everyone gathered around them hears this prophesizing in their own language – the language of their heart. The Spirit, who has always been with them, is revealing God in a new way – and giving the disciples the right words to speak.

Can you picture what this must have been like? These people, gathered from all over the ancient world, who spoke multiple languages, were hearing their own language in the midst of the chaos and confusion. It had to be very disorienting!

Let me give you an example of this. When I lived in Jakarta, Indonesia, the main language spoken around me was Bahasa Indonesia, except at home and at school. For the first few months, I even had trouble discerning where one word ended and another began – but I learned enough to be able to say, "Saya becara Bahasa Indonesia sedikit saja." (I speak Indonesian only a little bit.) Then, if Bahasa Indonesia wasn't enough, most people spoke three or four languages, and there were other public languages – the Arabic of the calls to prayer in the mosques, the tribal languages like Javanese that was prevalent where I was living, and only after all of that was there any possibility of hearing English. But if I were walking at the mall, or in the safari park, or so on, just hearing a word or two of English was a comfort to my soul.

I often think of this when I hear languages other than English spoken in America – for someone, that's a comfort to their soul. For the people who were at that very special Pentecost, it was even more than a simple comfort – it was a direct link to fill them with exuberance and joy! Hearing these words in their own languages made God feel present in a new way – newly there!

Now, whenever we read scripture in the church, we pray a special prayer first – a prayer for illumination, to see the scripture in new light, in God's own light. We are asking to hear the scriptures like the folks gathered at this special Pentecost – to hear with our hearts. We are asking for the Spirit to inspire us – literally, to breathe life into us, the opposite of expire, or breathe out of. When we

say that the Bible is inspired by God, we mean that God breathes on scripture, on the writers of scripture, and on us. That God makes it appear new to us, to hear an old message in a new way. For what happens when you breathe on scripture? The pages move. When God breathes on us, we, too, ought to move. Life – all life – can be seen as God’s breath – God’s Spirit – moving in the world. From the tiniest bacterium to the great whales of the sea; from the smallest child born in Bethlehem to the great Caesars of Rome, from the smallest church Session to the World Council of Churches – God’s breath moves them all.

And God’s breath, the Spirit of Truth, reveals the world to us like we’ve never seen it before. A world in which you matter – where your life matters. For through you, the world sees God moving. Through you, the Spirit is REALLY there – and newly there.

May the Holy Spirit walk beside you in joy and sorrow, holding you close and giving you space as needed. May the Spirit of God inspire you to study God’s Word, alone and with your church family. May the Spirit of Christ call you to take courage in following the Way of Jesus, to prayer and action in the world to bring God’s justice, freedom, and peace. Amen.