

Firebreathers
Pentecost
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[Joel 2:26-32 \(CEB\)](#)
[Acts 2:1-15, 32-33,37-39 \(NLT\)](#)

Pentecost is probably my favorite church holiday. I love how it is flexible, that there's no one right way to celebrate it. I love that it celebrates the Spirit of God descending on the apostles – and that in their interpretation, they explicitly reference that this same Spirit is poured out on everyone, old or young, of all genders, born anywhere on earth. It's a holiday that simultaneously celebrates God's action in the world, while recognizing the important work that we have to do, too! And, to top it all off, there's no such thing as Pentecost cards. To wish someone a marvelous Pentecost, you have to do so with your own voice, preferably in person!

“Marvelous Pentecost.” That's a pretty apt description, all told – after all, the day was chock full of marvels. It began for the Apostles as a gathering in confusion and sadness. Jesus, their Teacher and Lord and Savior – Jesus had ascended into heaven, and no one was quite sure what to do. Well, that's not quite true. As Paul Hooker pointed out in his sermon at the Tri-Presbytery meeting, the first thing the apostles did after Jesus ascended into heaven was... hold a congregational meeting to elect a replacement for Judas Iscariot. But, after that – what's next? What are these newly-minted Apostles supposed to Apostlize through the land? I'm sure that's what they were discussing as they had gathered for the Feast of Weeks (*ag ha'shavuot*), the celebration of when Moses returned from the top of the mountain with the commandments. It so happens that tradition put Moses on the mountaintop for 49 days – 7 weeks of 7 days – and so Shavuot is celebrated 50 days after the Passover. 50th day – *Pentekoste hemera* in Greek – became the translation of this holiday for the Jewish people living away from their homeland.

So, the Apostles were gathered for their 50th day celebration – Pentecost –

and, in a sudden rush, the sound of a roaring wind filled the room. This had to be terrifying – I don't know about you, but with all the heavy windstorms we've had lately, just hearing the roaring wind sets me on edge. How much more so to hear it while in a closed room! And then – flames, tongues of fire, appear and settle on each of the Apostles gathered there. Tongues of fire! Though the Bible skips over exactly what happens next, I think we can imagine the Apostles fleeing in a panic from this room filled with wind and fire. And when they open their mouths to tell people what has happened, what comes out is immediately understandable. So much so, that everyone gathered there hears their own native language. And that's when the Apostles realize that they're not just telling people about the fire and the wind, but about the other great things that God has done.

Marvelous Pentecost, indeed. From confusion and sadness, to fear, to divine inspiration and excited sharing of the wonders of God. This pattern struck me as being extraordinarily similar to the feelings experienced when being creative. Staring at a blank – whether page, canvas, block, or scene – you can be filled with confusion and sadness. Then, when you paint the first brushstroke or hit the chisel for the first time – fear. You've done it now – there's no going back. From there, the fear might grow or recede, but when truly inspired, you will find the fear receding and the excited feeling of sharing new creations, new wonders with the world growing in its place. Whereas before, you had a title – now you have a novel. A true novel, newly typed, and ready for changing and edits as time goes on.

Before, the Apostles had a start – the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Now, they are inspired by the Spirit, breathing in the tongues of fire and excited to tell everyone about God. Breathe in the fire of the Spirit – tell others of God's love. And, as we know, what they do while breathing in the fire of the Spirit is preach and teach, each sparking the kindling of the listener's hearts, passing the fire of the Spirit to everyone gathered. Yes, these Apostles are firebreathers, my friends. And, marvel of marvels, the fire of the Spirit that they breathe is still with us today. One heart at a time, the fire takes root. It warms you, it burns all the brighter as you walk closer with God and with others on God's path.

*It only takes a spark to get a fire going
And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love –
Once you've experienced it
You spread [God's] love to everyone
You've got to pass it on.¹*

Whew. Firebreathing apostles. Breathe in the fire of the Spirit – speak out the Love of God. That fire catches easily with old wood and with newly made charcoal alike. That's what the prophet Joel – and Peter quoting him – are getting at when they say, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young ones will see visions, and your old ones will dream dreams.”² Though the same fire of the Spirit fills all the people, they experience it differently, with a tension between what could be – the visions of the young – and what has been – the dreams of the old. Of course, these are general terms – and some people are young-at-heart, still breathing fire until their last days, while others are born with an “old soul,” longing for days they've never experienced.

Firebreathing is an apt comparison in another way – it's dangerous. Wherever there is fire, there is change – and change, especially to long-held beliefs and ways of life – is dangerous to those with a vested interest in keeping the status quo. You may remember that the Apostles, in general, did not live long lives. One by one, starting with James (Zebedee's son), the Apostles were killed or executed by the forces of the Roman Empire, pagan clergy, corrupt officials, and so on. The fire of God's love, calling people to repent, to change, to burn with the fire of the Spirit – that's a dangerous fire to be breathing. And yet, it is that fire that continues to burn in God's people today, allowing and encouraging change even within the Church.

Listen to these words from Katherine HawkerSelf: “I suspect that [Pentecost] meant to the [first century Jewish] community largely what it ought to mean to ours: Beware the wind, be careful what you pray for, don't wave a red flag unless

¹ “Pass it On” by Kurt Kaiser

² Joel 2:27-28

you're ready to run for your life... While not dishonoring the Torah or preexisting tradition, the story insists that the relevance of faith is in the moment as the flames demand to be seen, the wind pushes the boundaries, and the inexplicable speaking/hearing sequence demonstrates the presence of a mystery that we cannot define. In a sweet bit of irony, there is no story more anti-institutional than the one that is read to celebrate the birth of the institutional church.”³

An institution that is not able to change may not withstand the fire of the Spirit – but that doesn't mean that the fire of the Spirit will go out. To the contrary, the Spirit has been poured out on all people, and will continue to burn, warming hearts, leading people to the Light of Jesus' Way. As the late Phyllis Tickle points out in her book *the Great Emergence*, the fire of the Spirit seems to flare up around every 500 years, recognizing a need for change and renewal. The story of the exodus from Egypt – about 500 years before the founding of the Kingdom of Israel. Five hundred years later was the exile into Assyria and Babylon. Then, God walked among us as Jesus, about 500 years after the exile. Gregory the Great, in the 6th Century, caused great upheavals in the church. In 1066, the Great Schism separated the Catholic and Orthodox churches into their own spheres. In 1517, Luther began the Protestant Reformation by nailing the 95 statements to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Five hundred years later... and we're in the midst of another cultural shift, this time into something that Phyllis Tickle refers to as the Great Emergence, and Diana Butler Bass calls the Great Awakening. We're in the midst of a time of rebirth, and that means it's a time of pain. But it also means that we're able to be witnesses to how God is changing the world. And if this is a time of rebirth, then we are called, as much now as when Jesus told the disciples that they must be like children – or, as Nadia Bolz Weber puts it, “messy, sticky, full of energy and questions.”

Most of all, my friends, don't be afraid of the fire of the Spirit within you. Follow its leading, toward the path of Jesus, and you will be stoking the fire within

³ https://liturgyoutside.net/birthday_party_for_a_dying_institution/

you and within everyone you encounter. As you breathe in the fire of the Spirit, feel it releasing you from sin. Let the burdens you carry go – and be a firebreather, following the example of the Apostles on that Marvelous Pentecost.

May the Light of the Divine Fire help you see God even in the darkest corners of your life. May the heat of the Word of God warm you, fill you, and spark new life in the world. And may the Holy One, who teaches you to love your neighbors, shelter you in the storm before sending you out with a message of release from sin and hope for the future. Amen!