

Veni Sancte Spiritus

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,  
Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

May 28, 2023 - Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

2When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking

about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

<sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in

Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it

is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>'In the last days it will

be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men

and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the

heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to

darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls

on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Be with us in this moment, be in the words that I say, and in all the reflections of this

community. Move us out into the world, carrying your promise. Amen.

## Sermon

They were gathered together, a relatively small group so far:

The eleven apostles, Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and (the other) Judas, son of James.

And Matthias - who had been elected to the twelve.

And the women: Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene, and probably Martha and Mary, Salome, and Joanna. Peter's mother-in-law. Mary, the mother of James and John.

Probably Cleopas and his companion, of road to Emmaus fame, were in the upper room, too.

Luke 10 tells us that after the 12, Jesus sent out 72, to go before him to new communities.

They were the ones who'd traveled the countryside with Jesus, the ones who had passed the baskets of bread and

fish on the hillside, listened to his sermons. So they might have regathered that day.

It seems like these are the folks who might have come back together, after Jesus' death and resurrection. These are the ones the risen Christ might have appeared to in all those stories late in the gospels and in Acts, before Jesus ascended into heaven.

Acts Chapter 1 tells us that there were perhaps 120 of them, which seems like a lot - but in fact is a pretty small crowd.

There they were, after what seemed like the final denouement - Jesus ascending to heaven on a cloud, with the movie credits rolling past.

But if we know one thing about God, it's that God's story never ends. God puts a comma where we would put a period. What we think is the end of the book, is just God starting the next chapter.

So here comes the Holy Spirit, in all her wisdom.

It had been around fifty days -

Fifty days since Jesus died and rose -

It had also been fifty days since the Jewish celebration of Passover.

It was the Jewish celebration of Shavuot - known as Pentecost (fifty), when the Holy Spirit arrived to start the next chapter of the Jesus movement. And there's a thematic connection between the Jewish observance and this moment.

Rabbi Iving Greenberg describes Shavuot this way: "On Passover, God committed to the covenant [with Israel] by an act of redemption. On Shavuot, standing at Sinai, the Jewish people responded by accepting the Torah. The teaching that guides the way of the Jews, the Torah, became the ongoing relationship between God and the Jewish people...Shavuot is a holiday of partnership."<sup>1</sup>

Shavuot celebrated the giving of the law to the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai, symbolized by fire, sound and speech. It was a theophany, a divine appearance. We hear something similar in the story of the Christian Pentecost: the Holy Spirit appearing in tongues of flame and rushing wind. And the Holy Spirit is a source of wisdom, surely a parallel to the law. The Holy Spirit helps us stay in partnership with God.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Way, p, 68 & 75

It's crucial for us to remember that at this point in history the Way of Jesus was practiced by a small group of faithful Jewish people. The Pentecost story tells of the early church expanding to more faithful Jewish folks, within the context of a Jewish community.

The book of Acts tells two main stories: the first story is, to quote Barbara Brown Taylor, the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. The story of how the early church spread through the power of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent.

So the Spirit comes in, wind and fire and dove and wisdom shaking everything up, to send these 120 folks out of the upper room and into the world. This could have been the end of the story, but the Spirit's arrival meant the way of Christ was just beginning. They could have just focused in on themselves, but the Spirit called them to speak so that many people could receive the promise - "the promise is to you and your children" - 2:39. The Spirit, you see, is a dove - but perhaps also a mother eagle, shoving her young out of the nest so they can fly.

The Holy Spirit drew this group of a 120 outward, to focus on and understand their neighbors. To share the promise, and to build a bridge.

David Lose writes, “The Acts story depicts a group of believers who had everything to fear and, indeed, had been nearly crippled by fear earlier. And yet on Pentecost they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, a Spirit that encourages and equips them to go out into the marketplace and witness to their faith in Christ. In doing so, they risk not simply having people think they were drunk, but perhaps also treasonous, deserving of the crucifixion that their leader had suffered. Yet emboldened by the Spirit, they find the courage not simply to resist fear, but actually to step out in confidence and joy.”<sup>2</sup>

Our text says that people could understand the good news in their own language. That’s not to say that suddenly, everyone was speaking the same language - that suddenly everyone was the same. We often think of this moment as reversing the Tower of Babel - but I think it’s even deeper than spoken language. This is a moment where people could understand each other despite differences.

To quote the great and good Peter Gomes, “The gift of Pentecost, that which the Spirit itself brought to that memorable company, is the gift of understanding....it was

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2016/05/pentecost-c-a-spirit-of-courage/>

the gift of Pentecost that these many and diverse people should understand one another.”<sup>3</sup>

Now I said Acts has two main stories. The first is that of the Holy Spirit. Acts’ second story is that of the tension in early Christianity over whether the way of Jesus would remain a school within Judaism, or would welcome Gentiles. We get there in later chapters. The second story of Acts is Christianity moving from a school within Judaism to a separate religion. And that’s a complicated piece of our early history. But on this Pentecost, I keep thinking of the way Acts tells the story of the early church living into a new chapter, turning outward, becoming focused beyond itself.

The Pentecost word for us has to do with the Spirit continuously turning us outward, toward a hurting world in need of love and mercy. Turning us outward to speak God’s promises...

Beyond our few dozen

Beyond the Parthians and Medes

Beyond Jerusalem

Beyond the folks who speak our language.

To our neighbors.

(Everyone’s our neighbor).

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons*. p. 100



What we prophesy might be different today from Joel's word.

I pray the Christian message of 2023 has shifted from the moon turning to blood, and instead toward the steadfast, merciful, inclusive, creative, joyful love of God that is the ultimate promise of our faith.

On Pentecost we know once more that the Spirit is here to help us speak a good word.

The Mother Eagle Holy Spirit keeps shoving her young out of the nest so we can fly - and so we can share her wisdom, her fire, her love, beyond our little nest.

Amen.