

The Miracle of Pentecost  
2020 05 31 TUMC

[Numbers 11:24-30](#)

What is the miracle of Pentecost? Was it fire from heaven, burning but not consuming, roaring wind blowing through sealed doors?

And if so, who cares?

Tolstoy was distinctly unimpressed by the story, writing;

*It was claimed that the proof of what the Apostles said was guaranteed by the miraculous participation of the Holy Spirit in making decisions. But the assertion that the Holy Spirit spoke through the Apostles also needed proof. So it was necessary that the Holy Spirit should descend at Pentecost in tongues of fire - though it is not easy to understand why a tongue of fire burning above a man's head should prove that what he says will be the infallible truth. (The Kingdom of God is Within You, adapted)*

I'm not quite as cynical, but I have my questions about Pentecost. What are we celebrating on this day? When the Spirit of God, the Breath of Life, the Fire of the Spirit descended and came to be with us - forever. Why did that happen? What does it mean that it happened?

Pentecost does not mean that the church has been put in charge of the rest of the world. The Holy Spirit dwelling within us is God rooting deeper in our own bodies and community. But we do not get to claim God's attributes of power and insight. God is with us. We are not God.

Take a moment to think over the story from the Book of Numbers that Lorenda read for us. It's a fascinating story that takes place in the middle of considerable strife between God, Moses, and the People. Things are really at a breaking point. Moses is threatening to quit being God's Prophet and the leader of the people. The people are complaining constantly, fighting amongst themselves, and, to be entirely honest, God also seems to be in a really bad mood.

And then God supplies a plan to Moses, asks him to bring together seventy elders and have them circle around the Tent of Meeting, where God chooses to encounter Moses. When I picture that gathering, it's not a stately line of older men with long beards leaning on canes. It's a knot of grandmothers evaluating the options, and a mass of artesans, freed after years of forced labour to do work they find meaningful, and a trio of young mothers with babies on hips, wondering what called them away from their work. There's a person who has been enabled to attend by friends carrying him in his chair. There's a solitary teenager, looking up at the sky with their usual distant stare, listening to something that most others can't hear.

And, to be entirely honest, that's probably not the way the story went down. This is a gathering of influential people in a patriarchal time. A few verses after this story, Moses' sister Miriam will

be publicly punished for asserting her own prophetic voice. This is a gathering of older men. But when we imagine it, we have the right to see it in the light of our experience of the Holy Spirit.

The cloud of God's presence descends on the seventy gathered people, and each of them receives a portion of God's Spirit. The relationship that was formerly only held by Moses is opened up to others. And they prophesy. The word likely refers to a mystical trance, perhaps an encounter with the Divine, a holy perspective and insight. Yet I imagine them speaking aloud, one at a time, in familiar voices but with unfamiliar authority, seventy speakers addressing the needs and fears of their community, a harmonious discourse where no one is silenced or ignored, where humour is kind and without malice, where questions are allowed to exist.

But, to be entirely honest, that's probably not what was intended. And in fact, there is some scholarly debate about what happens next. Most translators say that they prophesied, and then they stopped and didn't do it again. Others say they prophesied and did not stop. What do you think? Was this a one-time only distribution of Divine presence? A millennium-early teaser for Pentecost? Or was this a new situation - the next step in the slow inexorable journey of God towards us?

One thing at least lines up with our story of Pentecost - it is out of control - or at least, out of human control. Two men, Medad and Eldad were summoned, but didn't show. They stayed back at home in their tent. And even so they start to prophesy too! Even though they didn't line up, they get their portion of God's Spirit, even though they missed their chance for whatever reason, they are included in God's purpose.

And Moses is informed of this happening, and thinks it is great! If only all of God's people were prophets, he says, wouldn't it be great if God's Spirit was on everyone!

What is the miracle of Pentecost? The symbols of fire and wind are important. The significance of this date as the founding of the church is at least interesting. But the miracle of Pentecost is that this is for everyone. Like the prophet Joel said, God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh - men, women and nonbinary people - young people, old people, people with bodies and minds that work differently from one other, people who think and speak and act differently. God's spirit is poured out on all flesh.

And that becomes the mark of this new thing, this new community, eventually nicknamed the Christians. God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh. There's no formal procedure, no priority boarding line, no birthright access for some but not others.

And that's what makes God's people fundamentally incompatible with the Principalities and Powers of this Present Evil. For those of us who seek to follow Jesus and to make our bodies and souls a temple for God's Spirit, we have to see the face of Jesus in all flesh, the Spirit of God in all people.

And when we do that, we can't permit violence, we can't excuse or explain death-dealing powers. We know that all people bear God's Image. But first and foremost we recognise God's Image in those who are oppressed, who are suffering, who are targeted for violence.

Floyd George, murdered by a police officer in full sight of the world.

Breonna Taylor, killed when police burst into her apartment, the wrong apartment, looking for someone already in their custody.

Regis Korchinski-Paquet, whose family asked the police to help her, and who is now dead.

There are other names, other Images of God.

What needs to change? Not the Black and Indigenous people who are the victims of death-dealing violence. We must call for the conversion of those police officers. We must call for them to be disarmed and retrained for a duty of care, or dismissed to other work. We must be open to the Holy Spirit's transformation of our systems and society, burning away whatever diminishes or destroys life. Whether racism and white supremacy, whether an unwarranted love of authority or a fear of any kind, whatever needs to be burnt away. Whatever is standing between our world and the miracle of Pentecost.

What is the miracle of Pentecost? It is a core and fracturing understanding that creates a new people. Pentecost is a crowd of people from every corner of the known world, all drawn to Jerusalem seeking God, and finding that they understood the words of a Galilean fishing group.

I want to ask you to imagine with me. What does it mean to be understood? Think about a time when you have been misunderstood. Where someone assumed the worst of something that you said or did. Or a time when someone laughed at your difficulty or discomfort. What about a time when you wanted help, but didn't know how to ask for it, or a time when a misunderstanding would be a risk to your safety.

That's not a good feeling. You can't build anything good out of that.

When I see descendants of formerly enslaved Africans saying 'Black Lives Matter', three simple words that seem to be perpetually misunderstood, misrepresented, and ignored. I see the refusal of communication, the refusal to understand and take seriously the deep history of those words, the deep necessity of that phrase. And the responses continue - correction, criticism, or being spoken over. And the murders continue. The deepest denial, the deepest rejection of human connection.

What would it mean to be understood? What would it mean if any one of us were able to be fully known when we shared our experiences, our fears, our hopes?

I want to ask you to imagine with me. Think about a time when you have been understood. When you have been held in mutual trust and comprehension. When it was safe to ask

clarifying questions, where ridicule was never threatened. What about a time or a relationship where you could demand the things you need, and be listened to?

That would be quite a miracle. And imagine the miracles that could follow if we could be fully known, fully understood, fully honest. Imagine the scrapping of weapons, the defunding of police, the abolition of prisons, the tearing down of border walls. That IS the vision of the Kingdom of God, that IS the outcome of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that IS the meaning of Pentecost - the wind that cannot be held back, the fire that illuminates but does not consume, the words that communicate and convict and heal and connect.

A few Sundays ago I spoke to this community, sharing a short piece of poetry: "once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God".

God has called us a people. God has chosen to call together a people in a world collapsing under the weight of ancient hate and bone-deep fear. God has done this, not because we are experts who have the answers. God hasn't called us together because we are able to save the world, or change the world, or even understand the world enough to speak to it.

God has called us a people because we suffer, we isolate, we hurt and hurt one another. God has done this, not because we are better than anyone else, but because we are this world, and because God loves this world. There is no in-group, no dividing line, no church that is not also the world.

God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh. All flesh inhales the Breath of Life, all beings exhale the Divine Spirit, and so we insist that no one be stopped from breathing. We insist, because God insists

Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God.

What is the miracle of Pentecost? What new hope does Pentecost bring into the world that helps us to cope with our pain and our sadness and our confusion and our anger?

Through fire and shadow, through crowds of confusion and misunderstanding, God's Spirit descends - and it does not stay in the locked room, or the orderly ranks of the invited. It spills out, bursts out, it reaches out and insists. This is for you, too. Fire spreads. Breath mingles. People laugh, and cry, and live.

Jealous? I wish that all of God's people were prophets and that God would put the Holy Spirit on us all! Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God. Hallelujah - Amen.

## Bible texts

Acts 2:1-21

the Story of Pentecost/the Birth of the Church

Numbers 11:24-30 New International Version (NIV)

<sup>24</sup> So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

<sup>26</sup> However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. <sup>27</sup> A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

<sup>28</sup> Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

<sup>29</sup> But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” <sup>30</sup> Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

### Questions for consideration

- 1) What memories do you have associated with the story of Pentecost - how have you seen it celebrated, marked or experienced in church (or elsewhere?)
- 2) When you read the passage in Numbers 11:24-30, what associations do you have? What is the attribute of God that this story is sharing?
- 3) Racism and violence are both ways of denying or diminishing God’s presence in other human beings. Have you ever had to assert your God-given right to dignity, safety, or provision? How do you connect experiences like that with the coming of the Holy Spirit?