

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Acts 2:1-21 Pentecost Sunday

What does it mean to celebrate Pentecost? What is the appropriate way in which to celebrate Pentecost?

This is also Memorial Day weekend, a holiday we also celebrate, but in clearly established ways, with a parade, with burgers, maybe placing flowers for a family member. For many, Memorial Day is just a weekend off, a holiday to gather with family, or go camping. For others it is an important reminder of sacrifices made, of the importance of leaders' decisions and of the cost of those decisions. There is some sense that Memorial Day is intended to keep memory and reverence alive, that we would not take certain things for granted. And what of Pentecost?

What is it we are remembering and trying to keep alive, to re-enliven in us on Pentecost. Like when we celebrate Good Friday, we are reminding ourselves of Christ's death for us, but we are also trying to keep alive our connection with the Christ who loves us and who died for us, to keep the emotional impact alive, to keep the relationship with God alive.

Sure, we celebrate Pentecost because the church begins on Pentecost, the apostles are filled with the Spirit in a particular way; they start carrying forth the work of the kingdom. We celebrate on Pentecost the Spirit that lives in us, that God indwells us, resides in the recesses of our hearts. But it risks sounding historical, it an event in the past. It loses its teeth, loses its emotional connection.

If we were to try to re-enter, to conjure that moment of Pentecost as our Acts reading depicts, I can't help but notice that Pentecost was a moment of chaos; a moment where normal patterns were disrupted, when the Spirit came upon them in such a way where they didn't really have a choice in the matter – they didn't get to choose, didn't get to tone the spirit down, didn't get to decide whether they thought it all appropriate or reasonable, they didn't have time to convene a committee – no the spirit came upon them, Acts 2 says, as a sound. It came upon them, overcame them, - the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.

What if the Spirit visited us in such a way this morning? What if the Spirit came upon us like the sound of a rush of a mighty wind, the kind of sound, the kind of

wind where we think the roof is going to come off, where we are not in control. Now some of you are thinking, “great, now we can a new roof!”

I remember the time a tornado came through our area in the western finger lakes. I was about 16. The Stevens were youth leaders at our church at the time. They lived in a small house, the size of a big bedroom broken up by a few walls. Their oldest was less than a year old. Janice huddled in the baby’s room on the floor with the baby in her arms. She told us later, when her voice returned, that she screamed herself hoarse then mute when the tornado ripped the roof off.

The Spirit came upon them like the rush of a violent wind.

Perhaps we should commemorate Pentecost, rather than celebrate. For people like ourselves who like our wills, like our choices, like our ability to reason, like our ability to negotiate, to say no, to sit back and critique, perhaps we should commemorate Pentecost as the moment that the Spirit of God overtook unsuspecting followers of Christ. They didn’t even see it coming. To commemorate as if to say, may such chaos remain in the past; may it never happen to you or I.

The Spirit came upon them, like the sound of a rushing wind, and divided tongues as of fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them.

The image in the bulletin is of a mosaic depicting this scene. It shows the disciples, each with a tongue of fire over each’s head. Images, or art, sometimes create moments for us, striking us in a unique way, or drawing attention to elements of the text that we have long overlooked, or reasoned away. For me, what struck me in the image was the tongues of fire literally lingering over each’s head.

That is how the passage reads: “and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” The artwork depicts it literally and visually, but the implication is that this crowd of pilgrims from all over the world are able to speak each other’s languages. A movement is happening and everybody is a part of it, participants, not observers. Rush of a violent wind, tongues, everyone speaking in new languages to each other, the world changing.

I wonder what Janice Stevens saw as her ears were ringing, and her voice raw, in the wake of the rushing wind that ripped the roof off her world – a wind that doesn’t allow you to go to bed easily that night, that forces a new beginning, a new

remaking of house and home, a new movement in and with others, a new movement out into the world bearing a testimony.

For the disciples and followers of Jesus, the roof was coming off the small room they were holed up in. The roof was coming off their routines and assumptions. The roof began to come off of their small circles as they started speaking in languages to people they had never had anything in common with, or so they thought; they started speaking of the good news to those of different tongues. Some who observed what was happening said that they were drunk with new wine. That was what it looked like to a sane person drinking coffee and reading their paper: drunkenness. craziness, chaos.

The Jewish festival of Shavuot, which is the occasion of this event, the reason Jews from all over the known world are still gathered in Jerusalem, the Jewish festival of Shavuot is a celebration of the giving of the law, celebration of God's gracious gift, of God's loving instruction, of order and structuring of our daily and monthly and yearly rhythms. But in place of the rhythms of the law, in place of even the presence of Jesus whom they had watched and followed and listened to for three years, and who has just left them, is the spirit blowing in on them, and through them. God's new gift for the structuring of daily life is less concrete, less predictable...

But God's gift of the Spirit is also closer to us, like the breath flowing in and out. Spirit; less like law and more like animation, less like the instructions for assembling your new chair, and more like learning to dance, to move in new ways, to take on the good news in and through our bodies, our souls, our hearts, our spirit.

<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.

What does it mean to celebrate Pentecost? I began with this question, and perhaps this is the question I am really trying to ask this morning. What does it mean to celebrate Pentecost – Is it to remember this event that happened in the past, to

domesticate it; to give it a quaint moment of thankfulness for what it has given us, and then move on with our ordered lives, structured by laws and routines.

*Or* is to celebrate Pentecost, more like a ritual, more how celebrations were conceived of in the biblical world; a ritual that invites you in to it, like an actor in a play, like a dance, like a re-living, where the words, like poetry, do something, where we become as those who were there in that room, where we make the event a live event happening again in our midst, a tongue descends on you and I also, where the Spirit blows upon us, messing up our hair, and the Spirit equips us with something to say, and with good news that is not just meant for us, but like a package for someone else, sitting in our hands,

Spirit. This is the gift of Pentecost. Spirit working in us, through us, blowing, whispering, even thundering like a mighty wind, and a tongue resting over each of us. But as we look around, we are caught, we are implicated, the Spirit has pegged us with a tongue, I see yours hanging over you, and you mine, and we wonder who will the Spirit lead us to, what work does the Spirit have for us, what tongue will we find ourselves speaking?

Perhaps a way of responding today is a simple prayer. Lord, fall on me again. Show me how to be a participant and not an observer. What work do you want to do in me and through me? Come upon me, Spirit, come.

Spirit, breath, life, emotion, pulsing, moving. The sound, the sound of a rush of a violent wind. Poetry, dance, movement, responsibility... Is that the kind of celebration we are up to?

And all God's people said...

Acts 2: 1-21

*The Coming of the Holy Spirit*

**2** When 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.”

*Peter Addresses the Crowd*

*(Joel 2:28–32)*

<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.'