

Acts 2:1-21
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Pentecost Continues!

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The story of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples is recorded only in the *Acts of the Apostles*. As you know, *Acts* is the second of two volumes by the same author. The first volume we know as the Gospel of Luke.

Luke recounts the story of **Jesus** from his birth, to his ministry with disciples in the Galilee, to his death and Resurrection in Jerusalem and his post-Resurrection appearances.

Acts tells the story of the **disciples** as they carry the gospel from Jerusalem to "the ends of the earth". That was the charge that the Risen Christ gave to the disciples as he was leaving them for good, ascending to be with God.

[from Acts 1]...*he ordered the [disciples] not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there ..[Christ said].. "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Pentecost was a major Jewish feast and an international gathering of pilgrims in Jerusalem. The descent of the Holy Spirit, which happened then, was the pivotal moment in the birth of the new faith. It transformed Jesus' disciples (ones who learn) into apostles (ones who are sent out). Those men and women now were called and anointed by the Holy Spirit. And they were empowered to take the news of the Resurrection everywhere--speaking every known language.

It is a fabulous story--impossible to translate into a single image: the wind and fire (both evoking the Hebrew god, Yahweh); the babble of languages--all of which were understood; Peter's powerful testimony to the assembly of Jews from around the world. Peter--who fearfully thrice had denied Jesus in the high priest's courtyard--now was an emboldened evangelist for the rest of his life.

We may question--even reject--the factual details of the Pentecost event. But we can't deny the outcome. The truth is that a small band of simple people from the Galilee, who had followed their teacher to Jerusalem, went forth from that place to the remote parts of the known world witnessing to their faith. Against all odds, they had the enterprise, the courage--the fire--to do so. Within a relatively short time, Christianity had spread throughout and beyond the vast boundaries of the Roman Empire.

The Holy Spirit went with them and empowered them. And, of course, She wasn't done then. Just as the Spirit came on them, so She continued to come--on one soul at a time. She still does today. Ask the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr where he gets his fire!

Or read the accounts of the epoch-making Azusa Street Revival, which began in 1906 and lasted for years! Crowds gathered there in Los Angeles at first to hear the black pastor, William Seymour, preach about baptism by the Holy Spirit. By many, many accounts, She came! Some people spoke in tongues. Some experienced miraculous healing. Others--empowered by the Spirit--began to preach themselves, while Seymour continued to preside.

From a *Washington Post* article on April 15, 2006, celebrating the centenary of the event: [in] *a ramshackle building used to shelter livestock...on the sawdust-covered dirt floor of the Apostolic Faith Mission -- popularly known as the Azusa Street Mission -- thousands of people came to worship at three services a day, seven days a week for almost three years....Azusa Street*

launched a global movement that overcame differences in class, gender and race to unite around the belief that the Holy Spirit still works miracles.

The article naturally cites the skeptics of the day--including Christians from other denominations, who were threatened by the phenomenon. One indisputable miracle of Azusa Street was that in a time of great racial and class divisions it brought together in worship people of all races, classes, ages, origins. The Spirit was poured out on ALL flesh.

Azusa Street gave rise to the Pentecostal movement in this country, which still holds by far the most integrated worship in America. It affected main stream Christianity, too. Witness the charismatic movements throughout America in the 1970s (even in the Episcopal church), and the revival of healing prayer and anointing. The movement continues to spread worldwide.

Friends, each of us will make of these stories what we can. My revelation this Pentecost is that I spent far too long of my life in doubt--disbelieving what I could not see or understand. Unwittingly, I closed my heart to awe, to wonder, and even to the fullness of love. Now I see miracles everywhere--from the perfection of a newborn child's fingernails to the flight of the Monarch butterfly from Minnesota to Michoacan, Mexico, to the way a loving smile or a kind word can utterly transform the energy between people.

I have chosen to open my heart to the unfathomable mystery of God's presence everywhere in creation. And I believe with the 12th-century abbess Hildegard of Bingen: "God is the good, and all things which proceed from God are good."

Now, wherever I see good in the world, and in our own dear little lives, I see God. What a blessing!

I believe with all my heart in the presence of the Holy One here and now.

One clear message of the Pentecost story is that God was coming to the whole world: "spirit poured out upon **all** flesh".

Today, we know that the Holy has many names. Ours as Christians include: God, Holy Spirit, Christ. Others in the monotheistic tradition include Elohim, Yahweh, Allah. But we cannot presume to contain God. Every culture, everywhere has found its own way to name and honor the Holy. We have much to learn from each of them. I rejoice that the Episcopal church and St. John's embrace that truth.

Finally, as I told the children at the baptism today, for me God's presence, God's Spirit, is love. Sometimes--when I get very quiet for a while--I can sense God's love on my own. But most of the time it is in community--especially with you, here at church. It may be in a song or a prayer, or a baptism, or in the bread and wine. It may be when we get together to share our stories or go out to help other people. It is when we are **together** that I feel God's loving Spirit most powerfully, most palpably.

God's spirit is here, in our midst. Like those disciples at the Pentecost, we are just ordinary people. And we are called **together** to do extraordinary things. We can, because God gives us what we need, and because God's Spirit goes with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.