

“Filled with the Holy Spirit”
Based on Acts 2: 1-12
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church
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“Tell me about when I was born.” “Tell me how you met my dad.” “Tell me where I came from.” These are common requests from children (at least on TV and in movies). There can be a certain assurance and comfort in hearing these stories of origin over and over again. Our origin stories are about us, even if they take place before our birth. And this story, commonly known as the birth of the church, serves such a purpose for us as Christians. And that is precisely what the day of Pentecost is for Christians. It is the story of the “birth” of the Church. The story of when, after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, the disciples and others were gathered in Jerusalem, waiting for something **BIG** to happen, though they didn’t know exactly what that would be.

On the festival of Pentecost, the Jewish feast of Weeks, something big did happen. “Pentecost” coming from the Greek word for “fifty,” Pentecost begins fifty days from the start of Passover and derives from the celebration of the spring wheat harvest. But this Pentecost wasn’t about the harvest of wheat. It was a harvest of souls.

While the disciples and others sat there praying and waiting, the Holy Spirit blew into the room like gangbusters and everything changed. This is the Holy Spirit’s big day. Of course, this isn’t the Holy Spirit’s first appearance in the Bible. The word for Spirit—*ruach* in the original Hebrew, just like *pneuma* in the Greek—has multiple meanings: wind, breath and spirit or soul. The Holy Spirit plays an important role in the creation story, in Genesis 1, God’s spirit blows over “the formless void and darkness [that] covered the face of the deep” sweeping over the waters. In Genesis 2, the Spirit is the life-giving breath of God breathed into the nostrils of the first human who then became a living being. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God’s Spirit appears in times of trouble and darkness. In the Gospels there are frequent references to baptism of the Spirit. But compared to the other two members of the Trinity, the Creator and the Christ, the Holy Spirit doesn’t get a lot of coverage in the Biblical story or in our liturgical tradition. The Holy Spirit is more of a “behind the scenes” worker but this day is the one day in the church calendar devoted to the Holy Spirit. Today is our opportunity to appreciate the work horse of the Trinity living in and among and through us, guiding our hearts and empowering our hands in ministry.

The book of Acts has the only story of the Pentecost event and relates “When the day of Pentecost had come, [the disciples] were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, 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.” And Jews from all over the known world, speaking every different language known at the time were astounded that they were able to understand what the disciples, these yahoos from Galilee, were saying.

In this sudden gush of wind, the incident of the Tower of Babel is reversed. Remember, the Tower of Babel: the people were getting too big for their britches, trying to replace God with themselves so God confounded their one common language into multiple languages and scattered the people. And here we have the reverse of that story. Faithful people of multiple tongues come together and are able to speak and be understood in their mother tongues. In this story, those speaking in tongues are speaking in actual languages they do not know and are heard and understood by native speakers. Unlike other instances of *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) found in other parts of the New Testament and in some faith traditions to this day, through this version of *glossolalia*, the disciples are able to share the good news of the Gospel with those who would not otherwise have known it.

It's interesting that the disciples are given credit for being filled with the Holy Spirit and that is why they are able to be understood by people speaking other languages. I wonder if that mighty wind of the Holy Spirit might not have touched the hearers, too, enabling them to understand? The hearers are also really important in this story. It is they who are hearing the Good News for the first time. Yes, some scoff and say that the disciples are all drunk on new wine (the strongest kind of wine) but Peter refutes it saying, it's only nine in the morning. And of course, many hear the disciples speaking in tongues and *do* believe. After Peter's sermon (of which today's passage only includes the first part) Acts relates that 3000 became baptized and were added to the number of followers.

New Testament Scholar Mitzi Smith notes an important aspect of this story, "Significantly, the first act of God's Spirit at Pentecost honors the diversity and individuality of the believers. God's Spirit does not first insist that the Spirit induced testimonies sound the same or employ the same grammatical inflections and conjugations and phonetics. Devout males, Jews and proselytes, from every nation, and who had traveled from Africa, Rome, and Asia hear this group of disciples speaking to them about the mighty acts of God in their own languages (2:8-11). God's acts remain God's acts in every language and culture. Confounded, the men do not agree about how to interpret the event that they have all witnessed together at the same time. Some translate what they hear as babble resulting from a midday drinking binge (2:13). Others cannot settle on one interpretation. Even the outpouring of God's spirit at Pentecost requires interpretation. Whenever God interjects or translates God's self into human history, interpretation is required. Theology, exegesis, hermeneutics, and preaching constitute human attempts to translate God-events into human language. Our God-talk is as diverse as our tongues. It is our language. It is never synonymous with God."

Smith continues, "Pentecost depicts a God who honors the polymorphic nature of human language and culture with no prerequisite or expectation for uniformity. God's Spirit in its fullness, unbridled and unrestricted, desires to sit on and to speak through individuals. We cannot use the Spirit to construct a pneumatology [that is, a study of the Holy Spirit,] that paints the voice and activity of the Spirit as univocal or one voice representing all ethnicities, races, genders, cultures, or classes of people. God determines

the time, the place, the channel, and the program content.”¹ God encourages us to be united, yet God also encourages our diversity and our individuality. We do not have to be the same, worship the same, think the same, act the same. The Gospel is for all, the gifts of the Spirit are for all.

In his sermon, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel speaking for God saying, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” All flesh. Not only for certain people. Not only for Jews or for Gentiles; not only for masters or for servants; not only for men or for women; but for *all* flesh. As the story of the early church continues, it will be evident that the Holy Spirit not only empowers speech and communication between those of different languages and backgrounds, but the Spirit also empowers the disciples to heal, form communities of mutual economic sharing and give the early Christians courage and strength to carry on in the face of persecution and martyrdom.²

But origin stories serve a greater purpose than simply a reminder of history long past. Through origin stories we remind ourselves where we come from in order to remind ourselves who we are now and who we are called to be. In some ways, this period was the Church at its best. That’s not to say that we’ve been heading down ever since that time, I certainly hope not. But it gives us an example of what church could be. An ideal to strive to live up to.

Of course, this is not the first time in the Bible that God appears in the form of a fire. Perhaps most memorably, God first appears to Moses in the burning bush which burned but was not consumed. Jana Childers, one of my seminary professors, notes that while commentators often point to other instances of God appearing as or with fire, the explanation of the “divided tongues, as of fire” usually ends there. However, as she writes, “New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen notes the similarity between a figure on Roman coins and the image of the text. Specifically, on a Roman coin of the first century, divided tongues of fire appear over the head of Caesar as a sign of royalty—even as a sign of divinity.”³ The appearance of the flames above the disciples’ heads indicates their own status as priests in the priesthood of all believers. The flames sitting over their heads, almost as crowns, indicate their status as heirs with Jesus Christ as children of God. And of course, the priesthood and inheritance is passed on to us as we continue to follow in the footsteps of those who first followed in the footsteps of Christ. As Childers puts it, we are “part of the widening circle begun in Acts—part of the growing momentum, building ripple by ripple toward the ultimate reunion of humankind.”⁴

How will we continue the ripple? What will we contribute toward the ultimate reunion of humankind? How will we continue to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel through word and deed? Because the story of the Pentecost isn’t only about those people up in that upper room two thousand years ago. It’s about us, too, being called to share

¹ Mitzi J. Smith, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=1&alt=1>

² David P. Gushee, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 16.

³ Jana Childers, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*.

our gifts of the Holy Spirit. It's about us, too, being called to lives of generosity and courage, of love and of faith. It's about us working with God to create a church that is a place of healing and wholeness, of well-being and hospitality, of diversity and unity.

In a recent article in *Christian Century* Rev. Jim Honig, a Lutheran pastor in Illinois wrote, "I asked an artist in our congregation to reflect on the Act 2 story of Pentecost and to provide a painting to support the proclamation of the Word on Pentecost Sunday. I gave him no further instructions. He specializes in stylized portraits that are often garish and alarming, with one facial feature distorted or out of scale, so I wasn't sure what to expect. He delivered a 6-by-3-foot canvas that is in many ways conventional, even similar to what I remember from my Sunday school leaflet. Scattered around the canvas are 12 human heads with tongues of flame perched on top of each head, each frozen in the act of speech. What immediately catches the eye, however, is the figure at the center of the painting, who is looking directly out of the canvas at the viewer. His index finger points at the viewer, very much like Uncle Sam in old U.S. Army recruitment posters."⁵

We are called to join the mission of those Spirit-filled disciples. Many of us have difficulty discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, the Spirit doesn't usually make such a dramatic entry as she does in the story of Pentecost. As Childers observes, "Many Christians have become accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit as more of a Hawaiian breeze than a Chicago gale."⁶ Many of us are more familiar with the more subtle movement of the Holy Spirit. In the "still small voice." In the nudgings and tuggings of our hearts and attention. In the kind words of a friend. In assistance from a stranger. In the slow, gradual spiritual growth spanning years or even decades.

That's one of the reasons we're doing the all church study. The idea of doing a study together, with the whole church participating, came out of the officer's retreat last fall. In the Monday night Bible study we learned that one of the reasons that the early Church was able to grow as it did against all odds was because of their "esprit de corps," their sense of a united, higher purpose and, of course, the momentum of the Holy Spirit. My hope with the study is that it will be an opportunity to open ourselves up to being more aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit through mind, body and spirit. Our weekly prayer request includes prayer for our church "that we will grow in our relationships with God, those in our church, and those beyond our church walls." That is our hope for the six weeks together. May we have growth of understanding of who we are and who we are called to be as Christians in general and as this church family specifically through study of what our denomination has named the six Great Ends of the church. May our relationships with God and with one another grow through small group fellowship and introduction (or re-introduction) to spiritual practices. May we welcome *shalom* wholeness and well-being into our bodies, relationships and church through introduction to Christian yoga. May we grow spiritually as individuals and as a church family. May we be filled by the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Jim Honig, "Reflections on the lectionary: Sunday, June 12: Acts 2:1-21" *Christian Century*, May 31, 2011, p. 19.

⁶ Jana Childers, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 17.