

What Does This Mean?

Acts 2:1-12

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Jerusalem was bustling with people. After all, this was one of three pilgrimage days, one of those times when everyone who could came to Jerusalem to celebrate the holy day.

And it was a day worth celebrating. Shavuot (sha-voo-OT), sometimes called the Festival of Weeks, in Greek called Pentecost: it was a time to remember the giving of the Torah. It was a time to remember that in the Ten Commandments, God forged a special relationship with the Hebrew people and they with God.

So, to honor that relationship, they came to Jerusalem. They came from all over. Because the people didn't just live in Israel. No, over the years they had been scattered far and wide. And yet they remained connected by their common faith. And so, they traveled from everywhere, from places where they had put down roots in times of exile, from places where their families had made a life. They gathered in Jerusalem to remember, to celebrate, to offer the first fruits of their harvest.

The city was indeed bustling with excitement. And if you listened you would hear languages from so many different regions. They shared a faith that connected them beyond their cultures, beyond their languages, beyond their homelands.

And there were, of course, local people around as well. People who lived in Israel. And other people whose journeys had been shorter. But people who also found meaning in gathering, who wanted to remember again the covenant they shared with Yahweh.

Among those who had made the shorter journey were the companions of Jesus. The eleven whose names were known as partners in his ministry, as well as the women and others who had been his followers. These, though, hadn't just arrived in time for Pentecost, but ever since Passover, ever since his crucifixion, ever since the day the tomb was found empty, after encountering the living Jesus, after straining their necks skyward as he ascended, we are told that they had stayed in Jerusalem.

They were waiting. Waiting as Jesus had told them to do. Waiting for this gift that would be given to them. Waiting to know what to do next.

They were waiting, not only for Pentecost, although they knew they would observe it, they would celebrate, they would remember. What they didn't know was how different this year would be.

So, there they were. "And," Luke writes, "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" (Acts 2:2-4, NRSVUE).

They may not have known what they were waiting for, but the Spirit appeared.

The Spirit moved among them.

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And the Spirit both drew people to them *and* pushed them out...out of the room where they were gathered, out into the streets, out into the world, out among the people who came from all around.

The Spirit arrived, and yes we are told that it rested on each of them in the form of something that appeared as fire. But, notice that the Spirit didn't just come for the individuals gathered.

It didn't appear and simply awaken something within them one at a time and then cause them to each leave, going in their own directions.

The Spirit didn't just show up for those who already knew Jesus, who had been sharing his ministry with him during his lifetime. It didn't just show up and reassure those who were already gathered together that they were loved, or that their lives had meaning, or that they still had a purpose.

No, the Spirit showed up and it pushed them out. It pushed them out into the world. It moved in ways that meant that they could connect with people from whom they had been separated before.

Did you hear that in the scripture? Luke writes, "And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'" (Acts 2:6-8, NRSVUE).

The Spirit showed up and broke down barriers that separated children of God. It didn't matter where they came from or the language they spoke, because the Spirit reminded them that they were all one.

The Spirit moved in ways that meant that the actions of one impacted the other.

The Spirit moved in ways that meant that they were not pushed apart but pulled together.

The Spirit moved and in doing so, it shaped each of Jesus' followers to be changed in ways that meant they were living as Jesus did.

The Spirit moved in ways that reminded them that this faith they claimed wasn't an individual possession but was something that changed the whole of them as it drew them to live and work together, to care for one another, and to welcome all who wanted to join.

Our scripture reading today ended with a question. As people were witnessing this movement of the Spirit, they were both amazed and confused. And they found themselves asking, "What does this mean?"

So, what does it mean?

Do we simply observe Pentecost as the birthday of the church? Do we remember it as a day so many years ago when something unusual happened? Do we think of it as a time when the church was beginning to form and the community was growing?

Or does Pentecost mean something to us?

Does Pentecost ask something of us?

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Does Pentecost call us again into community, to live a people - together - listening to God's heart and the movement of the Spirit? Does Pentecost ask us to go out into the world and to meet people right where they are and show them God's love?

Jan Richardson, on her blog, "The Painted Prayerbook" writes about Acts 2 saying, "If we didn't know it before, we surely know it now, as the second chapter of Acts unfolds: this is no tame God who comes to us, no safe and predictable deity. This is the God whose loving sometimes takes the form of scorching

"Before he left, Jesus told his friends he would send them the Advocate, the Comforter. Now we see this Comforter coming as wind, as flame, reminding us that comfort is not always comfortable, for it makes itself known in community, where we find the most searing challenges—and the deepest blessings—we will ever know

Jan Richardson then goes on sharing the poem *This Grace That Scorches Us: A Blessing for Pentecost Day*. It reads this way:

"Here's one thing  
you must understand  
about this blessing:  
it is not  
for you alone

"It is stubborn  
about this.  
Do not even try  
to lay hold of it  
if you are by yourself,  
thinking you can carry it  
on your own

"To bear this blessing,  
you must first take yourself  
to a place where everyone  
does not look like you  
or think like you,  
a place where they do not  
believe precisely as you believe,  
where their thoughts  
and ideas and gestures  
are not exact echoes  
of your own

"Bring your sorrow.  
Bring your grief.  
Bring your fear.  
Bring your weariness,  
your pain,  
your disgust at how broken  
the world is,  
how fractured,  
how fragmented  
by its fighting,

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its wars,  
its hungers,  
its penchant for power,  
its ceaseless repetition  
of the history it refuses  
to rise above

"I will not tell you  
this blessing will fix all that

"But in the place  
where you have gathered,  
wait.  
Watch.  
Listen.  
Lay aside your inability  
to be surprised,  
your resistance to what you  
do not understand

"See then whether this blessing  
turns to flame on your tongue,  
sets you to speaking  
what you cannot fathom

"or opens your ear  
to a language  
beyond your imagining  
that comes as a knowing  
in your bones,  
a clarity  
in your heart  
that tells you

"this is the reason  
we were made:  
for this ache  
that finally opens us

"for this struggle,  
this grace  
that scorches us  
toward one another  
and into  
the blazing day.

(Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*; [Pentecost: This Grace That Scorches Us](#) « [The Painted Prayerbook](#)).

Pentecost. What does this mean? Where does it call us? Who will we find our way toward, that we can carry its scorching, blowing, urging, life-changing gift together? Amen.