

Pentecost: Acts 2 & John 20
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“A very, merry unbirthday to you!”

With all that is going on this month—the end of school, the start of summer, presidential announcements, it seems to have escaped the notice of both the church and the world, that today is the third biggest day of the Christian year. Right after Easter and Christmas in importance is the Day of Pentecost, when a mighty wind blew through a house on a back street in Jerusalem and gave Jesus' disciples everything they needed to turn the world upside down: not money, not institutional structure, not even ordained leadership, but the Holy Spirit, the most elusive and least appreciated person of the Trinity, the muse and soul of Christ's church.

Part of the reason many churches downplay Pentecost, I think, has to do with our uneasiness with the Holy Spirit. Some of you are old enough to remember when we spoke not of the Holy Spirit, but of the Holy *Ghost*, which wasn't exactly what you want to think about right before going to bed. And others have heard enough about what happens in so-called “spirit-filled” churches to leave Pentecost to the Pentecostals. We hear about the noise, the mighty wind, the emotional eruptions. and “speaking in tongues,” and we are understandably a little apprehensive. We have been “educated” away from such emotional outbursts and prefer more orderly worship.

In recent years, though, mainline churches like ours have sought to reclaim Pentecost, celebrating it in a more respectable fashion as the “birthday of the Church.” To commemorate this event, churchgoers like yourselves come wearing fiery red clothes, we read parts of the service in foreign tongues, or blow out the candles on a cake that says, “Happy Birthday, Church!” in red frosting. That’s about as much Pentecostal spirit as most can muster.

And there’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, the balloons were my idea. It’s neat on Pentecost Sundays to look out at a sea of red in the pews, and I hope you all join us upstairs after this service for a slice of cake.

The problem is not with our clothes or cakes but that somewhere along the way, it seems, we have forgotten what Pentecost is really about. It’s not about noise and bluster *or* about the Church’s birthday. It’s about mission, about being sent, about being empowered to share the gospel with others.

In truth, I think the confusion over Pentecost goes back to the Scriptures themselves, to when the first Christians began writing down the story of how the Church came to be. You see, if we’re talking about the origin of the Church, we have to deal with the fact there are two very different birth stories, both of which you just heard read. And those stories, as different as they are from each other, present two very different pictures of the Church.

One of these stories is told by John, whom many Christians consider to be the most “spiritual” of the four gospel writers, and the other is told by Luke, who is the author of Acts. That they tell

two different stories should not surprise us, since they wrote for different times and places and from different theological perspectives. But if we are sometimes confused about what it means to be the Church in the world, then the differences between John and Luke's accounts are at least one reason why.

In John's story, which takes place on Easter evening, the eleven disciples were sheltering in place inside a house in Jerusalem. The house was shut up tight, as Jesus had just been arrested and crucified, and the disciples feared they'd be next. But then that evening Jesus slips into the house somehow, past the locked doors, and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he says. And he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side to prove he wasn't a figment of their imagination. Then he did something very creepy and mystical that none of them would ever forget. He breathed on them. He opened his mouth and poured forth what was inside of him into them so that the hair on their heads blew and their eyelashes fluttered and they could smell where he had come from—not just Golgotha and Galilee, but way before that—back when the world itself was being born. Anyone standing there that evening with any memory at all could smell Eden on his breath: salt brine, river mud, calla lilies. They could feel their own lungs fill as they breathed in what he breathed out. It was Genesis revisited, as they were created all over again by the power of the Spirit that came out of his mouth. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said, and they did. With a gentle breath, Jesus conferred his Spirit on his disciples. The Church became at that moment infused with the Holy Spirit, stitched to it, married to it.

As you may imagine, a birth story like that creates a particular kind of church. Which can be a problem, as some of these "Gentle Breath" congregations have forgotten all about the other part of what Jesus said, the "send" part: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." They like being breathed on so much that they stay right where they are, clapping their hands and praising God for the breeze without ever opening the door.

It's a very "John" idea of church, and there's nothing wrong with it. But it's not the only birth story in the Bible. Luke has a different idea, which shows up right away in his account of the Church's birth. In Luke's version, from the book of Acts, the disciples are still in a house, so he and John agree on that. But Luke's story takes place fifty days after Easter instead of the same day. And there are about 120 people in the room instead of just 10. The doors and windows aren't locked, either, because the people inside know they are waiting for something to come in from outside. According to Luke, the last thing Jesus said to them was, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." While they don't have any idea what that "power" might look like, they are waiting with all of the doors and windows open, so that whatever it is can get in when it comes.

On the day of Pentecost, "it" turns out to be something even Luke has no words for. It starts with a sound like the rush of a violent wind, he says, and it fills the entire house where Jesus' followers are gathered. Then it bursts into tongues like fire above their heads. But when they open their mouths to shout, "Look out! Your head's on fire!," that's not what comes out. Instead, what comes out are languages that none of those Galileans ever learned. They're speaking Parthian and Median, Egyptian and Phrygian, Latin and Arabic. And all of a sudden the people milling about outside, pilgrims from the four corners of the earth who've come to Jerusalem for the festival, they stop in their tracks, their ears perked by hearing their own language spoken so

far from their home. What they're saying is even more amazing. They hear news of God and God's deeds of power, of a radical change that's come about—in the world and in those disciples themselves—a change that has caused them to behave so bizarrely that the only explanation some bystanders can come up with is that they're drunk. "They are filled with new wine," they sneer. "But it's only nine o' clock in the morning," Peter protests. It's too early to be hitting the hard stuff just yet.

Then the Spirit rescues Peter by giving him something to say, not in tongues this time but in plain speech. When he opens his mouth to speak, what comes out is an old prophecy from the prophet Joel. Joel had foreseen days just like this one, when God's Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh—not just chosen people, not just the eleven disciples but all people—young and old, male and female, slave and free. And the fact that this gathering of Galileans sounded like a meeting of the United Nations was the sign that the prophecy has begun to come true, and that everyone upon whom the Spirit has just been poured is hereby recruited to spread the word: that in Jesus, God has acted to save and restore the world.

Here, then, is a different birth story for a different kind of church—not a “Gentle Breath” congregation but a “Violent Wind” congregation—a church where there is such a strong wind blowing that people have to lash themselves to the pews in order to not be propelled out the door. Sure, the members of this church come back once a week to rally, to rest and reflect, but then God's wind blows and it's back into the world again—to tell everyone they encounter of this new thing that God has done in Jesus and is doing in the world even now.

For the Violent Wind congregation, Pentecost is not the “birthday of the Church,” but its “unbirthday,” the breaking open of the doors, the felling of the walls that kept God's people smugly separated from everyone else, that confined them in their tradition and their temple. It signifies the compulsion of Jesus' followers to go out, outside, beyond what is familiar and comfortable. To call Pentecost the “birthday of the church” is to make it an event, a one-time thing, something that happened in the past, when really Pentecost is a description of a new situation, a new reality that began 2000 some-odd years ago and that we are living in today. The Holy Spirit came to the Church then and He is coming to the Church today as well.

This is why I am less than satisfied by the name given to the church season that begins next week, the season that lasts for half a year. This season doesn't even have a name; it's just called the season *after* Pentecost. Really, we should be calling it the season *of* Pentecost, for everything in the church's life and in our own Christian life proceeds from that reality, from the standpoint of living in a world that is now enlivened and enriched and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

As the story of Pentecost shows, God's purpose in sending Jesus was not to build a new temple or to start a new religious club or to encourage people to devote themselves to crumbling institutions. That was the problem of the Judaism of Jesus' day. It had become ingrown, focused upon itself, they'd forgotten their mission, their calling. And so, when Jesus came to them, he stirred up all sorts of trouble, because he challenged Israel *to be Israel*; that is, to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Going all the way back to Father Abraham, God promised that through Abraham's line, through Israel, all the nations of the world would be blessed. And here now at Pentecost, that promise has begun to come true. Empowered by God's Spirit, his

followers, the Church, are sent out to share with all the world the news of what God has done in Jesus. That is the purpose, the meaning of Pentecost—not the fire and wind, and not a birthday cake, but our being sent to the four corners of the world, or just to the corners of the city, to spread the good news.

As scary as that might seem, fact is, without the Holy Spirit working in other people's lives, in the church, you and I wouldn't be here. For it is the Spirit that led the disciples to pass on the Gospel to others, who passed it on to others, who passed it on to others, all the way down through the centuries to you and me, who heard the Good News and learned what it means to follow Jesus. I can tell you personally that I had a completely different career planned when I was younger. But something happened—the Holy Spirit happened!—the Spirit came upon me one day in high school on a retreat weekend and I was set on a different course, a much more gracious and fulfilling course, that has led me to be here talking with you today. That's what the Holy Spirit does. And He may do that to you too.

So don't be surprised, as you go about your day this week, that what might at first feel like just a gentle breeze on the back of your neck may soon become a windstorm that throws you out the door and down the street. Because Pentecost wasn't just something that happened two thousand years ago and it's over. That "violent wind" is blowing even now among us today. Thanks be to God!