

Pentecost 2021

Acts2:1-21; Jn16; Rom8:22-27; Ps104

It may not feel the same, but I still don't want to underplay it.

There's plenty in the Pentecost story from Acts that may seem so extraordinary, so much different from your own experience on this Pentecost, not least that they were all together in one place! (They are in a house, though, so that matches your location.)

You probably didn't hear the roar of a mighty windstorm. If you held something flammable over your head, it is unlikely it would start on fire or that you'd need to stop, drop, and roll. And you're probably not speaking in foreign languages that you'd never bothered to study but in which you find yourself suddenly fluent. Whatever you're doing, I sorta hope you're not attracting a crowd, much less one that would ridicule you as being drunk in the morning.

In the Pentecost story, all of those phenomena and phenomenal behaviors are attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

That may run a risk of you suspecting or even expecting that when the Holy Spirit arrives, she shows up with pyrotechnical linguistic glamour. And as you remain with hair unsinged, monolingual (or at least not super-lingual), in a house not experiencing an un-forecasted whirlwind, and not drawing gawking onlookers, you could wind up with a feeling that the Holy Spirit must be absent.

But I don't want to diminish your own strangeness. You've still got a pretty odd phenomenon: that you're receiving this sermon. It's not normal. It's counter-cultural. It's weird. More than these minutes with these words, there's the whole thing of you being connected to church community.

What explanation do we have? Can your participation be explained by the fact you enjoy friendly and supportive relationships? But you wouldn't have to be part of church to be around like-minded folks. We may not even be the best at caring for each other in times of need. The same if this relates to a desire to be a good person, as if this were the sole or primary place for morality and ethical encouragements. It's not likely you're bored and just have some time to kill. Are you still

here because it was your upbringing and now is just a habit?

I think we'd mostly have to say that your strange behavior must be because the Holy Spirit is at work, creating faith in you. She's making you do this otherwise unnatural thing. All the briefly extravagant details of the Bible reading actually may pale in comparison to the lifelong oddity of faith evident in you. The Holy Spirit's work is about the only explanation. We know it's there, as Linda said.

That's also where Peter turns as he explains what was going on. It's interesting: he doesn't try to explain where the weird events are coming from. There are fires and windstorms and stories of miraculous abilities throughout the Bible, but Peter doesn't pick one of those as his proof-text. He quotes the prophet Joel. It's an explanation that doesn't point to the phenomena at all, but to the people. Peter essentially says, Don't be surprised this is happening, because Joel says this includes all people. The old and young. The masters and the servants. Every gender. The point isn't the supernatural stuff. The point is the people. All the people.

Like you.

The point is the Holy Spirit has been poured out on you. God is working on you, and in you. In the words of Jesus, God is alongside you as the Comforter. And Jesus says it's even better to have this Comforter with you than to have Jesus himself. She is with you as Comforter amid all your pain and suffering and waiting for it to be better.

That's why the Holy Spirit bothers to show up. Not for a little magic show of wind and flames and languages. The Spirit comes to you because you need her, need comfort, need something for the pain and suffering of life in this world.

Maybe that's also why God insists on so abundantly pouring out the Holy Spirit—since the need is so pervasive, this pervasive presence needs to be on all flesh and more.

Paul asserts it's not only we who are longing, but all creation, that even “the things of nature, like plants and animals, suffer in sickness and death” and need some sort of liberation.

Psalm 104, one of my favorites, shares this worldwide outlook, of the “wide variety” of creatures God has made, so many that the “earth is

full” of them. And they all look to God for goodness, for relief from panic, for life. And that Holy Spirit shows up for them, to renew the face of the earth.

I was reading more of the prophet Joel, to discover more about those words that Peter was quoting. It turns out that it’s even more prolific than on all people—young and old, rich and poor, all genders. Just before those verses, the prophet proclaims, “Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field” (Joel 2:21-22).

In Joel’s time, they needed the Holy Spirit to come and comfort and set things right because of an ecological catastrophe, the destruction of locusts that not only destroyed crops, but made the land itself suffer, the animals hunger. How amazing that this prophet preaches to the dirt! Joel has God’s good news to announce: “Do not fear, O soil!” It’s faith-enlivening even to imagine the conditions for soil that is glad and rejoicing.

On this Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit again and continually arrives to comfort and renew, we may associate with that ecological destruction, facing a climate emergency that is causing plants and animals to be sick and die. We may take Joel’s metaphors of destruction caused by a great army and long for a chance to rejoice and be glad for people in Gaza, who have suffered much too much, and not just in recent 11 days. Or maybe we take the pouring out on all flesh to think of communities without privilege and disenfranchised genders, and know that God’s work is for them. Or maybe you picture the old and the young and hope for relief from suffering for our youth who have born a strange brunt of the pandemic and the elderly with diminished life and lingering illness.

Or maybe you know your own difficult circumstances, your fears and pains, your discontent and your longing. And whatever that is, God’s goodness is poured out on you, comforting, renewing life, bringing joy.

It may not be a little fire on your head, but that work of the Holy Spirit abides with you and for you. And that is the most miraculous thing of all.