

A PENTECOST STORY

Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on May 28, 2023
Text: Acts 2:1-21

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 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? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great
and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The family arrived on a warm June day: a mother, a grandmother, and five children ranging in ages from three to seventeen. As they climbed out of the van, it was apparent just how tired they were. Some time ago, they'd traveled from a refugee camp in Cameroon to Darfur, Sudan. There they boarded a plane and flew to Paris, where they caught a connecting flight to the United States.

The littlest ones were teary-eyed and clingy, hanging on to the bone-thin hand of their grandmother. The mother and older children had that glazed look that comes from extreme fatigue. This family, refugees from Rwanda, was being placed by the local resettlement agency. A house had been acquired, but was still being renovated. So for the next week or so they'd live in the church.

The church had some Sunday school classrooms that weren't being used over the summer, and these had been hastily converted into bedrooms and a living room. Downstairs was a full kitchen, and the bathrooms both had showers. It would do for now.

The day the family arrived, church members greeted them and gave them a tour of the building. The family spoke a native dialect of Rwanda and a little bit of French, but no English. A translator—a former refugee from Rwanda and now an employee of the resettlement agency—interpreted for the family. Here's the kitchen. This is a gas oven. Here's how you light it. Be careful. Here are the pots and pans and dishes. Watch the children outside. Don't let them play near the road. There's food in the fridge. Don't eat the rabbits that live in the yard. This was a whole new world for the family, but they'd worry about that later. As soon as the tour was over, they all claimed a bed and fell asleep.

Over the next few days, the family fell into a rhythm within the life of the church. During office hours, they were usually sleeping; their biological clocks were still set several time zones away. It wasn't until late afternoon that

they'd rise and begin their day. But slowly they adjusted.

By Sunday, they were able to worship with the Korean Methodist Church that shared the building with the Presbyterian congregation. It was an amazing sight: a Methodist service spoken in Korean, held in an American Presbyterian Church, attended by Rwandans in full African attire. At the potluck after the service, one of the Presbyterians remembered enough French from her high school days to say a few words to the family. How are you? My name is Betty. What's your name? French had been the common language in the refugee camps, and now it was the common language again among this diverse group of people filling their plates with hot dogs, baked beans, tuna casserole, deviled eggs, and brownies.

After lunch, the church gave the family some clothes that people had donated, along with a few things for the kids to play with: soccer balls, a bike, a hula hoop, and some sidewalk chalk. The kids were delighted and immediately ran off to play. Laughter filled the air—another common language that knows no boundaries.

Ten days after their arrival, the house was ready, and the family prepared to move out of the church. A van came to take their few belongings—three suitcases, plus the beds they'd been sleeping in, including the linens, and of course, the toys. The sum total of their possessions. Everything they owned in the world.

As they finished loading the van, one of the kids turned and gave the pastor a small wooden picture with strands of colored wheat and two coasters with psalms inscribed on them—gifts a nun had helped them make in the refugee camp in Cameroon. Thankfulness—yet another common language.

With the family gone, the church building was quiet again. But the church itself wasn't the same. The congregation had learned an important lesson that week—a lesson about giving and sharing and living in a way that was

simple yet abundant. Despite all the differences in language and culture and food and customs, a bond was formed. Regardless of the inability to really speak to one another, the church members and the family members were able to communicate a shared compassion for one another and a common love for God. It was truly an experience of the Holy Spirit moving in and through them all, which is what the reading today is also about.

In Acts this morning, we hear the story of Pentecost. The disciples are gathered together in Jerusalem. There's a festival going on, and people have come from all over—"devout Jews from every nation under heaven." Suddenly there's a disturbance, a loud commotion, as the Spirit arrives and gives the disciples the ability to speak in different languages.

The atmosphere is electric. A crowd of festival-goers gathers around, amazed and astonished. They hear the disciples speaking, and somehow each of them understands in their own native tongue. They're startled and perplexed, and some of them try to dismiss it as drunkenness. But the disciples know what's happening: God is in the wind. So Peter stands up and declares that this is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promises, spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh..."

Today, we remember and celebrate that moment, as we try to imagine what it must have been like. The author of Acts has his way of describing it—as "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" and "divided tongues, as of fire." But plenty of others down through the ages have come up with their own descriptions.

Hildegard of Bingen was a twelfth-century writer, composer, philosopher, visionary, and mystic. She described the Spirit in the following lines, translated by Stephen Mitchell and included in his anthology of poems titled, *The Enlightened Heart*.

Holy Spirit,
Giving life to all life,
Moving all creatures,
Root of all things,
Washing them clean,
Wiping out their mistakes,
Healing their wounds,
You are our true life,
Luminous, wonderful,
Awakening the heart
From its ancient sleep.

The Spirit is given to us as a constant reminder that God is with us. The Spirit comes not just to comfort us, but also to change us. Because the love of God will do that. It'll change us from the inside out, and awaken us in new ways, even when we don't understand how or why. Through the incarnation, in the person of Jesus, we see that God intends to be active in the lives of human beings. In the arrival of the Spirit, we see that God intends to work in and through each one of us, to bring forth the hopes and dreams of a living God—a God who continues to create in ways beyond our knowing.

So whether we experience the Spirit as a fiery breath of wind, or a presence that awakens our hearts, or in the process of making a home in a strange new land, Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit is God's gift to us. Given to us in baptism and honed by a life of faith, the Spirit imbues us with gifts that are intended to be shared—gifts of generosity and hospitality. The baptismal covenant reminds us that our acts of caring and sharing enable us to participate in God's creative works.

And so, with gratitude to the One who's given us life, the Spirit beckons us to open our hearts to the world around us, offering hospitality to those we meet, friends and strangers alike. Amen.