



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, JUNE 5, 2022  
ACTS 2:1-21; ROMANS 8:14-17; PSALM 104: 25-35,37; JOHN 14:8-17, 25-27

## THE SPIRIT ACTING UP: THIS IS OUR STORY!



**ACTS 2:1-21** *[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. 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.'"]*

This Feast of Pentecost gathers up a great deal of liturgical purpose and meaning for us today: the happy occasion for baptisms which is always joyful; the end of Easter and the turn into a new season with new cadence and rhythms; some claim it as the birthday of the Church so there can be that festive atmosphere as well. But at the core of this holy day, and infusing all the other aspects we gather into it, is this notion that the gift of the Holy Spirit alights on the community in new and invigorating ways.

Fifty days after Easter and its resurrection glory, Pentecost comes, with seeds in an ancient festival for the winter wheat harvest, when folks were expected to travel to Jerusalem the Holy City to present their offerings of life and labor to God. The city swelled each year with hordes of people from

across the known world, an array of humanity bringing all their ethnic, language and cultural diversity onto the scene. It is then that the Holy Spirit breaks in.

No other feast day features the Acts of the Apostles as prominently as Pentecost does. If you've never read this pivotal book in the life of our forebears, I encourage you to do so. It is truly quite remarkable for its twists and turns, its theological developments that document the origins that make possible our even being here today. It's got all the hallmarks of an epic: chance meetings and hot disputes, magicians and vivid dream sequences, storms at sea and shipwreck on a deserted island, snakebites, stonings and silly bickering among the men, but there's also some really strong women whose courageous and faithful leadership helped make

Christianity what it is today. Have I piqued your interest? I hope you read it!

Luke is a great story teller, crafting the Book of Acts as a sequel to the gospel, the rest of the story. Well, not the rest, but the next chapters that afford us the bridge back to the gospel. This is our story, and Luke has a remarkable gift of cadence, noting some parts as mere passing fancy, and then others with a deep dive into rich detail. He slows things down, inviting us to catch our breath, and breathe in the beauty. A luxurious feast for all the senses.<sup>ii</sup>

Such is the case in today's passage. Luke provides remarkable detail here, seemingly unnecessary detail to set the scene. These diverse peoples who on any other day could not communicate easily with one another. Lost in a sea of difference. But with the Spirit moving, enthusing, inspiring, the disciples to speak the good news in Aramaic (their native tongue), but the diaspora hears in their myriad languages.

Luke belabors things here by listing specific ethnic groups present and participating: "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."

It's an odd taxonomy, isn't it? Not really necessary to the story, much of it foreign to us, except it slows us down and provides us a sense of the dramatic diversity present and participating. And there is the gift to be gleaned. Too often I think, we risk equating unified community with uniform community. It's easier when we all speak the same language, see the world through similar lenses, lean the same way politically.

There is a danger in this—I have heard said by some in this nation, including Christians, that the best way to resolve our divisions that are often rooted in cultural diversity is to erase ethnic diversity. "I don't see color;" this nation is a "melting pot," etc. These are metaphors for assimilation which have left a sad trail of pain and suffering. I hope we can see the folly and morally perilous path we go down if we buy into such an approach.

I suspect most here this morning want nothing of that narrative, but there's an insidious extension to it that is still in play. I heard last week that the migratory trends of Americans have become increasingly polarized—people are moving preferentially to places where others think and behave like them. It is a key factor in the state of political discourse in our nation. We are creating bigger bubbles of separation, and it is fraught with risk as we strive to find a peaceful way

forward together. This is a natural enough inclination, to want to live in places where we feel safe and respected, and affirmed in our worldviews, but there is a societal price to be paid as we do this more and more, as we become more isolated in our sameness...and we are the poorer if we lose the capacity to communicate with those who differ from us in some way...with those who see things from a different perspective.

This seminal passage from Acts—this feast of Pentecost—imparts the beautiful gift that it is precisely in the milieu of diversity that the miracle of common discourse happens. Or to say it more emphatically, the Spirit chooses to show up and impress her energies of conversion when the scene is sufficiently diverse for people of faith to see it as a holy act of God's doing, not theirs.

This doesn't mean we all have to agree blindly on everything, and especially on matters of

human dignity. Again, assimilation is not the Spirit's MO. Nor should it be ours.

I'm reminded that all humans share 99.9% identical DNA, so there is plenty of common ground for us to find if we are willing to work at it. But it is the 0.1% that affords the range of diversity that makes for an interesting story for humanity—a story which interests the Holy Spirit to break in, time and again, doing her thing in rich and remarkable ways.

So let's sing our songs of the Spirit of God today, let's baptize with water and the Holy Spirit, let's hold the space for the Spirit to come among us, to act up in our story, to speak to us and through us, to change us for good, and in doing so, might just change the trajectory of the story of humanity to one of more wholeness, dignity, justice and peace.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.jennortonartstudio.com/pentecost-and-the-holy-spirit/>

<sup>ii</sup> Some of the thematic approach to this sermon is drawn from an essay by Greg Carey viewed at <https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury/sc-free-2022-05-30?e=328856c4cb> on June 3, 2022.