

Sunday, May 24, 2026
Day of Pentecost (Year A)
Acts 2.1-21; John 20.19-23
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Right for the Moment”

You have to admit . . . the Holy Spirit knows how to make an entrance. Our first reading for today, this Day of Pentecost, is the account of the first Pentecost event. Well, that is not entirely true. In more ways than one. While we recognize Pentecost as the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit and, by extension, the birthday of the Church, up until the event recorded in Acts, Pentecost was a completely different thing. Before it became the Christian celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost was a Jewish holy day.

The term Pentecost simply means “fiftieth.” In the Jewish tradition, Pentecost refers to the fiftieth day after Passover, the most sacred of holy days. The fiftieth day after Passover was the festival of Shavuot, also known as the Feast of Weeks, celebrating the end of the wheat harvest. Rabbinic tradition holds that Shavuot was also the day on which God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. The giving of the Law being the sacramental act by which a rag-tag band of Hebrews fleeing slavery in Egypt became a nation committed to serving God. A celebration of a new beginning for the Hebrews, for the followers of Judaism. Because this celebration was such a big deal to the Jewish people, Shavuot, or Pentecost, was one of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (along with Passover and Sukkot) in which devout Jews would make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Hence the presence of all the Jews who speak a variety of languages as recorded in Acts.

It was this Jewish festival of Shavuot that God chooses as the venue for the introduction of the Holy Spirit to the world, as Jesus had promised the disciples on multiple occasions. During his Farewell Discourse on Maundy Thursday Jesus tells his disciples, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (Jn 14.16). The Advocate that he later specifically identifies as the Holy Spirit (Jn 14.26). And then immediately before his Ascension, he tells them “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8).

As we heard, the Holy Spirit, arrived with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” visually appearing as tongues of fire resting on each of those present, so that “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” A dramatic display of the coming of the Spirit, of its tremendous power. Meeting and engaging with those present in ways that were appropriate and understandable to the individual, while also being apparent to the entire gathered assembly.

The coming of the Holy Spirit transformed a major Jewish celebration involving people from across the Diaspora into what we now recognize as the birthday of the Church. Appropriate that a Jewish celebration of their formation as a nation dedicated to serving God also serves as the initial celebration of a new expression of that tradition with a common purpose and recognizing our common heritage. The Church that, in the fullness of time, would expand far

beyond its Jewish roots to incorporate members of all nations, races, cultures, and languages. Continuing and building upon the diversity present at that first Pentecost event.

By all accounts, that first Christian Pentecost event was quite a spectacle. Attended by crowds gathered to celebrate their common heritage, treated to cacophonous theatrics and pyrotechnics at the coming of the Holy Spirit. A scene of absolutely joyous chaos, met with rousing fanfare.

When I think about that first Pentecost event, I recall another Pentecost that was equally joyous and, in the moment, felt equally chaotic. I was the Associate Rector at Trinity Parish in Redlands. Our Rector had retired at the beginning of the year and the Interim would not start for another couple of weeks, so it fell to me to preside at that year's Pentecost service. And we had it all that year. We had all the pomp and circumstance of an Anglo-Catholic parish, including lots of incense. The church was filled, including special guests: the Mwamba Children's Choir from Uganda was going to do a concert later that day, so they and their chaperones and teachers were in attendance. Adding to the multi-lingual, international feel of the day. We had special music by both the Chancel Choir and the Children's Choir. And, of course, being a baptismal feast day, we were going to do a couple of baptisms.

The service was going along perfectly. Until it wasn't. After Tim our Deacon preached, we got ready to do the planned baptisms. Only, the baptismal candidates were not present. Deacon Tim got a text from the family, who lived in Victorville. They were stuck at the Cajon Pass because of a traffic jam. I did the only thing I could. I briefly explained to the congregation what had happened and adjusted on the fly. I blessed the water and we did the renewal of baptismal vows, followed by the asperges, of course. You know how I love doing asperges. The service continued. As we were wrapping up the Peace, Charles our Head Usher, who had been keeping an eye out for the baptismal family, notified me that they had just pulled into the parking lot and would be there in a few minutes. Being one for proper liturgical decorum (and still relatively new at navigating the nuances of such matters), I told him, "It's too late. We've already moved on. We have to continue with the service." I began walking back to the front of the church. Then I stopped myself. Or rather, the Holy Spirit stopped me. I turned around and said to Charles, "What the hell! Let's do this." I practically ran up the aisle to the organ and told the music director what was going on and asked him to play something until we could do the baptism. Meanwhile, Deacon Tim ran down the aisle and out the front door to escort the baptismal family into the waiting church. After a few minutes of getting settled and reorganized, with the congregation completely puzzled as to what was going on, Deacon Tim escorted the family to the font at the front of the church—to rousing applause. We baptized Bridget and her baby Felix, which was followed by another round of applause and cheers.

Then came the announcements. I basically preached a mini sermon on the Holy Spirit, saying something to the effect of "What we have just witnessed gives us an idea of what that first Pentecost must have been like. Chaotic and messy and filled with great joy. Which is precisely how the Holy Spirit operates in our own lives, as individuals and as the Church. In ways that are just what is needed in the moment." I then had to announce that the Holy Spirit was operating in another way—that at the end of the summer, I would be leaving Trinity to serve as priest-in-charge at St. Paul's in Santa Paula. After allowing the parish to recover from that unexpected

bombshell—again, that’s how the Holy Spirit sometimes works—we were able to move on and continue the service, which went off without any further hitches. Thank you, Holy Spirit.

While not planned, while chaotic at times, that Pentecost service gave us all what we needed: a sense of how the Holy Spirit operates. Confirmation that the Holy Spirit is still active in the world. And an idea of how the Holy Spirit can and does intervene to accomplish what needs to be done, despite our humanness. In ways that are right for and needed in the moment.

Although, the Holy Spirit does not always operate in such chaotic ways. Thanks be to God. I know I couldn’t handle chaos like that all the time. No, Scripture also gives us examples of more intimate ways the Holy Spirit is imparted and operates.

When it comes to God initially sending the Holy Spirit, Scripture actually provides conflicting accounts. The most well-known and celebrated of those is, of course, the account in the Acts of the Apostles. But we had another account in today’s readings, as well. One that actually took place a full fifty days before the first Pentecost event. What took place on the evening of the Resurrection, on Easter evening. As we heard in the Gospel reading for today, the remaining disciples minus Thomas were in hiding. The Risen Jesus makes his first post-resurrection appearance to the male disciples (he had already appeared to Mary Magdalene earlier in the day). After establishing who he is by showing them the wounds of the crucifixion, he does two related things. He says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Effectively commissioning them to carry on the work he had begun during his earthly ministry. And then, “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

No rush of violent wind. No cacophony. No speaking in other languages. No tongues of fire. Just a simple, gentle breathing on them. The only common element between this account and that contained in Acts is the movement of air. In Acts, the Holy Spirit arriving with “the rush of violent wind.” In John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit being delivered with a breath. In Hebrew, wind and breath are the same word: *ruach*. The same word that is also used for Spirit. *Ruach*. Wind, breath, Spirit. All the same. All one. Unlike the very public account in Acts, which would happen in fifty days’ time, here, in that locked room, Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit in a very gentle, subdued, intimate way. Giving the disciples what they needed in the moment, at that difficult time in their lives, to be able to continue on, living into the commission Jesus had just given them. Giving them what they needed to help them get to the more public—and far more dramatic—introduction of the Spirit to the broader community. Think of the Easter evening event as sort of a “soft opening” before the Spirit went public.

So, strictly speaking, the first occurrence of God sending the Holy Spirit to the budding Christian community was not on Pentecost, but on Easter. But that does not diminish the importance of the Pentecost event. If anything, the two accounts—one on Easter evening and one on the Day of Pentecost—serve to illustrate the varied ways that the Holy Spirit arrives and how she operates. As in the Pentecost event reported in Acts, arriving in dramatic, even chaotic ways. Just what was needed in the moment to capture the attention of those gathered. Just what was needed in the moment to usher in a new way of experiencing God’s ongoing presence in the world. And the account in John’s Gospel, with the Holy Spirit being quietly imparted in an intimate way, giving the disciples what they needed to get them through difficult times. Giving

them what they needed to help guide them and empower them as they figured out how to live into the commission Jesus had given them. Giving them what they needed to prepare for the more public manifestation of the Spirit at Pentecost.

These two accounts are certainly not mutually exclusive. This is not, strictly speaking, an either/or situation. Rather, these two accounts serve two very different purposes, illustrating the varied ways in which the Holy Spirit comes to us and operates in our own lives. Sometimes, needing a more dramatic, chaotic approach to get our attention. And other times, needing a more gentle, intimate, personalized approach to comfort us, to guide and motivate us, to empower us for what comes next. Ways that can really only be known to the ones being touched by the Spirit.

These two very different ways in which the Holy Spirit comes to us show us in no uncertain terms that, however the Holy Spirit makes herself known, she does so in the way that is appropriate and is needed and is right for the moment. Be that in quiet and intimate ways or in dramatic ways. Regardless of how the Spirit shows up, all we have to do is be open to receiving what is lovingly offered.