

Once again we meet head-on the familiar yet fantastic story of the birth of the church. Once again we ask ourselves, can this be true? Like the crowd that witnessed it first, we still ask, What Does This Mean? My answer is – we are here today, as a church. If Pentecost had not happened in a dramatic way, I don't think there would be any Christian churches. In the same way that the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai establishes core values of the Jewish faith, the story of the Spirit coming on Pentecost establishes core values of the Christian faith. The story is at once a fulfillment of ancient covenants and the commencement of God's new covenant, a turning point for both Jews and Christians. Celebrating the Day of Pentecost is still gaining traction in mainstream Christianity. For some of you here today, Pentecost may not be a Christian festival you grew up with. This morning, I'd like to place the Pentecost event first in the context of Jewish believers. Then, to point up the universality of “every nation under heaven,” I'll describe Pentecost from some other faith traditions. Through these, I hope that we can connect our faith now with a tradition that began in Old Testament times.

Ruah ha-Kodesh

The question came up in Bible study this week, Do Jews believe in the Holy Spirit? Thanks to a little research forwarded to me, I can report that, yes, the Holy Spirit was known as *Ruah ha-Kodesh* even in First Century Judaism, as interpreted by rabbis of the time. ‘*Ruah*’ means spirit (or wind or breath) in Hebrew. It appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible. When actors in scripture are filled with God's *ruah*, they become prophets, or kings, or spiritual leaders.

‘*Kodesh*’ means holy.

The flow of inspiration from God to human was considered ‘*kodesh*.’

Someone filled with *Ruah ha-Kodesh* was inspired to speak with God's divine breath. The Holy Spirit is manifest to students of Torah as a personified voice engaged in dialogue with them.

The Feast of Weeks

Just prior to the Christian era, a Jewish custom described in the Bible as the Feast of Weeks came to be known as Pentecost, because of its timing about 50 days after Passover. It had agricultural roots, largely lost even to Jews, as the offering of spring lambs and wheat. In the days of the First and Second Temples, the Feast of Weeks was a communal holy day, tables spread with bounty. It involved an obligatory pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After destruction of the 2d Temple in the year 70, the Feast of Pentecost came to celebrate God's gift of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, which only Moses and Aaron witnessed first-hand. The Hebrew people cowered in fear down below, witnessing God's spirit as raucous thunder and fire. Moses emerged from the clouds with the Torah, the product of *Ruah ha-Kodesh*.

Oral traditions surrounding this moment describe sparks shooting out from the Decalogue, like hammers pounding on anvils.

Each blow produced 70 sparks, representing all languages of the known world — one God, one Law, many languages.

This interpretation of Torah at Pentecost was especially vital to the Jews' sense of continuity around the time of composition of Luke and Acts, between 75 and 95 ad.

The NT takes pains to prove that Jesus fulfills the sum-total of the prophets and the Law.

And it is after Jesus’ ascension to heaven that the Holy Spirit, beginning at Pentecost, extends God’s covenant promises to all the world.

Powerful Preaching of the Apostles

The visuals of what transpired in the upper room catch our imagination.

The air itself burst into flames above the heads of each apostle gathered there. But the high-point of our reading is proclamation: Literally, “They began to speak in other languages to the extent the Spirit caused them to speak out.”

The verb I translate “speak out” is a Lukan expression that describes loud vocal expression on the part of heretofore silent apostles. Even if they were preaching in Greek or Aramaic, which one would expect of Galileans, their preaching before a multitude had to be spirit-inspired.

But they are not preaching in a familiar language. They are preaching in foreign languages, and doing it in a way that foreigners are understanding.

“God squeezes sounds out of human beings they did not know they could make, so that they have to ask strangers to tell them what they are crying out,”

writes Barbara Brown Taylor.

The effect on their hearers is provocative.

They were confounded.

They were out of their minds, saying to one another, “What Does This Mean?”

What it means is global spiritual transformation. Transformation is not what happened at Christmas, or even at Easter, which, though miraculous, wasn’t witnessed by earthlings. No.

Jesus predicted that only by his absence would his transformative presence, in the form of the Spirit, be felt in the world.

The apostles did as Jesus commissioned them: Going to all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In Jerusalem, just before nine AM on Pentecost the church of Jesus Christ was birthed.

The Pentecostal Movement

The twentieth century saw the blossoming of a worldwide movement labeled Pentecostalism. It was an outgrowth of the Holiness Movement that emerged just before the turn of the 20th century.

Asking in the 1900s “What Does It Mean to be Holy,” the Holiness revivalists sought purer ways, more spiritual ways, to express their faith.

In the U.S., early outbreaks of Holiness cut across racial and social lines, even in the heartland.

One noteworthy outbreak of Holiness occurred in Los Angeles at the Azuza Street Mission.

Because the Spirit was manifest so powerfully in the nearly non-stop worship services at Azuza, the mission took the name “Pentecostal.”

Pentecostal worship soon erupted throughout the Western world and, more recently, in the emerging world.

As early as the First World War Pentecostals were among those to advocate pacifism.

By the Second World War, Pentecostals were counseling conscientious objectors to the draft.

For their progressive stands on moral issues, Pentecostals earned the respect of most Protestant denominations.

But what set them apart – far apart – from other denominations was speaking in tongues.

It was present from the beginning, at Azuza Street Mission.

Glossolalia, as it is also called, is ecstatic speech, unintelligible even to the speaker.

A spirit-led interpreter attests to its authenticity as spirit-led speech. The behavior is real, observable, and somewhat consistent across time and culture. That which adherents claim is spirit-directed speech scientists would call learned patterns of vocalization, quite different phenomena from speech as we know it. For most of us as children, the Lord's Prayer was just a learned pattern of vocalization: "Our father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name." So I would not be too quick to discount the spiritual authenticity behind glossolalia. Speaking in tongues is attested in the gospels and in writings of Paul, who was careful to put it in its proper place. What occurred at the first Pentecost event wasn't glossolalia, because the text says people in the crowd understood it. "Each of us hears, in our own native tongue." Rev. Harold Trulear, a Baptist pastor, wonders, "Why are Pentecostals the only ones who name themselves after this festival? "Why aren't all Christian churches called Pentecostal?" "Respectable Protestants have sentenced Pentecostalism to the scrap heap," comments Trulear. "It's associated with holy-rollers. It's for the uneducated, the poor, the Third World. Either the whole church is Pentecostal," adds Trulear, "or none of it is." Anyone is Pentecostal if they believe that God did a unique work on that Pentecost back-when. No church body owns Pentecost. All Christian churches carry the firebrand.

Methodism as a "Brand"
One American denomination identifies with fire.

The United Methodist Church (or UMC) is a mainline denomination been both Protestant and evangelical. Founded in 1968, about 50 years ago, by the union of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the UMC traces its roots to 1736, when John and Charles Wesley brought their revivalism from England to America. Like 20th century Pentecostals, John Wesley was culturally sensitive, socially progressive, and strongly opposed to exclusivist religious claims. He vigorously opposed slavery and advocated alms to the poor. Charles Wesley was a prolific hymn-writer; we still sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." In the mid-1800s the Holy Spirit filled a blind poet, Fanny Crosby, inspiring her to write over 8000 hymns for the Methodists, such as "Blessed Assurance". Still the largest Protestant denomination in the world, its membership in Europe and the United States has declined noticeably since 1968, while membership in Africa and Asia has grown, where not coincidentally Pentecostalism flourishes. Inclusion of the Brethren traditions has made Methodism the closest mainline expression of Pentecostalism. You may remember when the UMC began branding itself with The Cross and Flame. Dual tongues of fire point upward around and through the cross of Christ, representing the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost.

Our Worship Branded by Pentecost
The Presbyterian Church (USA) also sports flames in its logo.

Presbyterians can attest to Pentecostal power in their church governance.

From the opening part of the Book of Order:

In the power of the Spirit,
Jesus Christ draws worshipping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. F-1.0401

The newly-revised Directory for Worship of PC(USA) centers on the workings of the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures describe how the Spirit moved at the dawn of creation, anointed Christ in baptism, raised Jesus from the dead, and was poured out on the Church at Pentecost. The same Spirit is still at work in the life of the Church and the life of the world. The Spirit gathers us for worship, enlightens and equips us through the Word, claims and nourishes us through the Sacraments, and sends us out for service. W-1.0105

Language, both verbal and non-verbal, is the medium of worship.

Since Pentecost, the Church of Jesus Christ has been a community of many nations and cultures, united by the power of the Holy Spirit. The words we use in worship are to be in the common language or languages of those who are gathered, so that all are able to receive the good news and respond with true expressions of their faith. W-1.0302

Worship may follow a set order or be free-flowing:

Fixed forms of worship are valuable in that they offer consistent patterns and practices that help to shape lives of faith and faithfulness. More spontaneous approaches to worship are valuable in that they provide space for unexpected insight and inspiration.

In whatever form it takes,
worship is to be ordered by God’s Word and open to the creativity of the Holy Spirit. W-2.0102

Yes, even Presbyterian worship can be spirit-led.

What Does This Mean?

For believers here and now, the Day of Pentecost is a celebration of the universality of the church. Ever since Pentecost, followers of Jesus have been connected in a way that joins them in the most intimate ways – voice, memory, sound, body, land, and place – in spite of national or geographic boundaries. God still speaks to all churches in different ways. The meaning of Pentecost is the joining of all God’s people in one Holy Spirit. Amen.