

“Wind, Fire, and...Groans”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 24, 2026

Pentecost Sunday

Romans 8:22-27

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Acts 2:1-21

Today’s story began with the 120 gathered – these friends, family members, and followers of Jesus. Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit as being like the sound of a rushing wind, an apparition of flaming tongues resting on each, and the ability to speak to witnesses from all different lands in their various native languages.

Why were they there? These witnesses had come to the Holy City to for a harvest festival – one of three times each year that Jews made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem – the Festival of Weeks, so named because it took place fifty days after Passover. In Jesus’ day, worshippers went to the Temple to offer the first fruits of their new crop, a sacrifice of bread made from the newly harvested wheat.

Who were these people? They came from all parts of the ancient Middle Eastern world; some of the place names we know, others are unfamiliar to us and difficult for us to pronounce. They came from Palestine and Israel, Egypt and Libya, parts of modern-day Iran, Iraq and Turkey. All nations and places that – for many centuries and, still, today – make up our world’s conflicted geographical tinderbox.¹

When Pentecost occurred, most of these lands had been conquered by Rome and before that, by Greece under Alexander the Great. This is a list of colonized states. Within their borders resided numerous foreigners, including Jews who had become an outcast diaspora, at the bottom of colonized hierarchies wherever they lived. Acts 2 is a story of subjugated people.

What does this mean? (v. 12) These Jewish pilgrims, gathered in Jerusalem, are understandably perplexed. They are accustomed to being subjugated by colonizers and divided by language, but now hear the gospel proclaimed to each in their mother tongue. The Spirit of God intervenes to bridge this difference. This Holy Spirit is being poured out on all people – sons and daughters, the young and the old, free and enslaved, the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

¹ Diana Butler Bass, “Uprising Unleashed – Against the Empire”

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (v. 21) What God had always spoken to Israel now God speaks even more loudly in the voices of these Galilean followers of Jesus to the many. It is an invitation to join them. For, now love of neighbor will be the love that builds directly out of the resurrected body of Jesus.

What does this mean? The crowd wants and explanation for these proclamations about God's deeds of power. All of these languages, now being heard in their own native tongue. What is the significance of this? What is really going on? "It means that God is here and the time of God's salvation has arrived. Liberation from a world dominated by empires, defined by a cruel diaspora, is announced. The new wine is being poured out on those who did not realize how deeply they thirsted."²

This Holy Spirit proves to not be a quiet, heavenly dove, but a loud, violent wind and tongues, as of fire. The groans of people from all across the known world – suffering as they have been under colonial oppression – are heard and the dividing walls between them are torn down. They become what will eventually be known as the church: the body of Christ re-created earth. On Pentecost, God shakes the world at its core and all of its inhabitants are invited into a new tapestry, woven together with purpose and hope, all through the life of discipleship in Jesus.

Thus, we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church. All people are invited now to love one another like siblings, to look upon their neighbors from any nation or language as true neighbors. Those who were colonized and oppressed – these Parthians and Medes, the Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia and all the others who gathered in Jerusalem that day for that harvest festival – they became the renewed body of Jesus; this embodiment of solidarity, freedom, and equality in and for the world. The church was born so that all people from all corners of the world could become neighbors together – loving one another, supporting each other, seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

So, what does it mean to live lives inspired by God's Spirit? How do we welcome and accept others? How can and will our faith community break down and reach across boundaries? What does all of this mean for us and for the church today?

Let us be the church by proclaiming and living into this good news: for God's salvation has come to all people. Amen.

² Willie James Jennings, "Acts" from *Belief: A Theological Commentary of the Bible*