

The Day of Pentecost – Acts 2:1-21
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples after his ascension. But did his devoted followers really know what to expect? Did they really have any idea how the Holy Spirit would show up? Based on what Jesus told them just over a week ago, they might have understood that the Holy Spirit would show up like a gentle dove descending from heaven; for he said that “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” The author of Luke & Acts mentions the Spirit's role several times in Jesus' early ministry. After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Following those forty days and nights, Jesus returned to Galilee filled with the Holy Spirit and news spread about him throughout the surrounding country. And when Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth, he picked up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” From that point on, the Spirit remained with Jesus but was not mentioned again specifically until just before Jesus' ascension. At the beginning of Acts, Jesus told the disciples, “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.”

The Holy Spirit will play a critical role in equipping Jesus' followers in continuing his mission, but exactly how the Spirit will show up is unclear.

According to Scripture, the Spirit showed up to their holy ancestors through dreams, visions, and prophecies. It might seem reasonable to expect the Spirit to show up again in a similar way. But since there is nothing reasonable or predictable about the Spirit, the disciples would soon experience her power being poured out on them in new and unexpected ways.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were all gathered together for the primary Jewish festival of Shavuot. It was the fiftieth day after Passover; a time when devout Jews gave thanks for the giving of the Law to Moses. It was a time of pilgrimage to the Holy City, when friends, and relatives, and strangers would gather from all parts of the known world for celebration. Much of the usual planning and preparation had already taken place, but this year's feast day would turn out different than expected. But this year's usual festivities would be disrupted because the Holy Spirit had other plans. On this day of Pentecost, the Spirit would overturn everyone's expectations about life as they knew it.

It's difficult to comprehend exactly what happened when the Spirit descended on the gathering in that upper room. What the disciples heard was different than what they felt. What they saw was different than what they might have expected. And what they spoke was different than what they could have understood. The best that the author of Luke & Acts could describe was based on analogies. The sound that filled the room was like the rush of a violent wind. But had there actually been gale force winds, the divided tongues that seemed like flames of fire would have been blown away along with everyone and everything in that space. Had the flaming tongues really been on fire, they could have caught the entire building on fire. But although the flaming tongues weren't fire as they knew it, the power that descended upon them and through them spread like wildfire. Before they knew

what was happening, the disciples started speaking in languages that only the visiting pilgrims could understand. Amazingly, at the center of this chaotic experience, was the Word of God being proclaimed anew. Despite all of their senses being thrust into overload and their character being mocked by unbelievers, the disciples were actively witnessing to God's mission in ways they never could have imagined. By the end of this Day of Pentecost more than 3,000 people would be baptized not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit can be surprising, disruptive, and amazing. She goes where she will and can threaten our sense of comfort and order. The Spirit of God can upend all our expectations because She is always creating and renewing life. Yet despite all the change and disruption, there is hope that the Spirit will ultimately unite us in God's mission of love; in realizing the vision of God's beloved community.

What happens when the Holy Spirit shows up in your life? Are you surprised? Annoyed? Thankful? Interruptions can be inconvenient, and disruptions can be frustrating. But when we pause to reflect on what is happening or what just happened, we may find that the Spirit is initiating a holy interruption for a holy reason. Perhaps we have been walking around on autopilot and have forgotten to appreciate the beauty in nature surrounding us. Perhaps we have taken our friends for granted and forgotten to nurture our relationships. Perhaps we have relied on the way things have always been done, and resisted looking at new ways of being. When interruptions and disruptions happen in life, might there be opportunities being offered to re-connect with God and each other in ways we have yet to imagine?

Much of the past year of pandemic has been a time of disruption and change. Our lives have been upended, yet we have landed on our feet and are discovering

new ways of staying connected as a people of faith. We have encouraged one another with the Spirit's gifts of faith, hope, and love. And we continue to give thanks for God's abiding presence and power in our shared lives. But the disruption and change continues. Even though we would prefer to have many aspects of our lives return to the way they were, we know that the world has changed, and so have we. As we transition toward reconnecting with those we love, we are finding a new rhythm to life. The Spirit is prompting us to reimagine who God is calling us to be with and for one another. She continues to nudge us to assess the impact of our displacement, to acknowledge the pain we have experienced, and to discover how God is commissioning, accompanying, and equipping us for renewal. The Spirit is empowering us to explore new ways to communicate with people outside the church building. And she is guiding us to open our hearts, and minds, and ears to receive the gifts that our wider community has to share with us.

In her new book, *The Church Cracked Open*, Stephanie Spellers calls out the reality of disruption and decline in dominant American Christianity that has been happening since the 1960s. As we continue moving through the “global pandemic, economic volatility, and a massive racial comeuppance,”¹ Spellers believes that we have “added an extra degree of urgency and anxiety”² to conversations about how God is calling us to be church in the world. We have been “displaced, pushed out of our buildings, away from our moorings.”³ The church has been cracked open in ways we never expected, and the role and place of religious institutions in society is being reassessed. This may feel as scary as the sound of a violent wind blowing into our

¹ Stephanie Spellers. *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*. New York, NY: Church Publishing (2021), 11.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

sacred gathering places. It may appear as amazing as divided tongues as of fire alighting over our heads. It may be as surprising as having the ability to speak in ways that other people can understand. It may be all of these things flowing in and around and through us, for the Spirit is empowering us to re-birth the church wherever we are, and wherever we go, and in collaboration with whomever we encounter. The holy interruption that is in our midst is a holy opportunity to develop new ways of being church, and discover new languages for connecting with our neighbors. This current holy interruption is an invitation to look beyond the comfort of this sacred space and venture out in places where we can listen to new voices that testify to God's life-giving presence; and to share the love of God in ways that "transcend religious, cultural, and language barriers."⁴ This is the miraculous and amazing work of the Spirit into which we are called and for which we are continually being equipped and empowered. As we begin this season of Pentecost, let us make space for the Spirit's creative disruptions. Let us be filled with wonderment at her appearance. Whether the Spirit shows up like a gentle dove or a gale force wind, let us be inspired by her power to breathe new life into our faith community through the gifts which she generously pours out upon all of us.

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⁴ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-pentecost/>