

[Spirituality](#)

[Scripture for Life](#)



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 20, 2018

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Luke's story-telling ability sparkles in the Pentecost story. He narrates it in what we might call the "energetic superlative." Luke portrays all of Jesus' disciples gathered when suddenly the sound of a wind (like the Creator Spirit of Genesis) fills the air and balls of fire hover like tongues over each of them. They are all filled with the Holy Spirit who leads them to proclaim their message in languages they had never studied, but happened to be those the pilgrims who heard them could understand. The two key elements of the story are the extraordinary influence of God's Spirit on the community and the breadth of the mission they were given the ability to accomplish. That helps us interpret Jesus' promise to send the Spirit to the disciples.

Jesus calls the Spirit "the Advocate." While Christian preachers have often taken that to mean that the Spirit is sinful humanity's advocate before God, Jesus seems to be saying just the opposite: The Spirit is God's advocate with humanity. The role of the Spirit is to be God's goad, reminding disciples of who they are and enabling them to fulfill their call.

To prepare for this celebration, we need to put our heart and soul into singing the refrain to Psalm 104. It takes courage and generosity to pray, "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth." We are praying to the God of the Exodus, who called Moses to free the slaves and create a people of the covenant. The prayer also recognizes God as the Creator, the origin and destiny of life, the God who shares divine creativity with us.

We might imagine that the Pentecost disciples were praying something like Psalm 104 when the Spirit broke in on them. Whatever they might have been anticipating in their prayer, the Spirit's descent massively exceeded their expectations — and not only theirs, but those of the people who saw and heard what happened.

Luke wants us to realize that the disciples were suddenly on fire with their message. He doesn't give us precise details about the group's gift of tongues, but reading between the lines, we remember that the women and men it happened to were part of a tight-knit group who had traveled together and shared their faith and hope in Jesus. In both the literal and the symbolic sense of the idea, they spoke the same language.

When the Spirit exploded into their presence, they found themselves able, even impelled, to proclaim to others what it meant that Jesus was the good news, God's most explicit, most insistent, word of love and hope for the world, the supposed victim against whom evil and death had turned out to be impotent.

Not only were the disciples on fire with that message, but they were amazingly capable of sharing it with people with whom they had previously not been able to communicate. They found themselves united in a communion of hope and dreams, of faith and commitment, with people who literally did not speak their language.

Luke's rendition of the Pentecost story gives an overview of the Acts of the Apostles and the mission of the Church. It relates how the Spirit can enable disciples to touch hearts and build communities of faith among people all over the world. The Spirit who enflames disciples reveals how, as Gabriel had told Mary at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, nothing is impossible for God.

Today we are invited to join with the disciples who gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus' return to the Father. The world around them seemed to be the same as it had been two months before, but they were different enough to allow themselves to be set on fire by God's Spirit. If they had not been open to God's goading Spirit, Christianity would have died at its birth. Instead, they carried the message of God's relentless love throughout the world and for 2,000 years others have continued to carry it forth.

The readings present Pentecost as, what I would call, the "Feast of Limitless Possibilities." Pentecost challenges us to ask ourselves if we are courageous enough to harbor the open-ended expectations demanded of anyone who prays, "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth." The feast asks if we are generous enough to give ourselves to spreading the fire of God's love in a world as needy as it has ever been.

We have been promised the Spirit who can renew the face of the earth. When we invite that Spirit into our world, we must do it with our whole heart or not at all. God is goading us, but we have to decide if we are willing to carry fire.

ACTS 2:1-11

Luke pulls out all the stops to tell us about Pentecost. This was a pilgrimage festival that brought large crowds to Jerusalem. Some eventually celebrated it as the anniversary of Moses' reception of the Law and a renewal of the covenant.

Luke, who likes to demonstrate how all of history revolves around the Christian story, says that the Spirit came when the Pentecost time had been "fulfilled." He was setting his readers up to see the new creation fulfilled with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the community of disciples.

Like a breathless, wide-eyed messenger, Luke describes how the wind/sound came suddenly and filled the entire house. He adds that all the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and appeared before a large crowd of Jews from every nation. It seems that only such an excess of enthusiasm could convey what he wanted people to understand.

It all begins with the disciples waiting together, just as Jesus had told them to do. Luke describes a sound like wind, knowing full well that the word "wind" also recalls the word for spirit. He's reminding his readers of the creating Spirit of God found in Genesis. As that noise filled the house he says that the disciples saw fire alighting on each of them in a form that looked like tongues (glossa), a symbol of the power their speech would have. With that, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

One of Luke's obvious emphases in this narrative is the inclusiveness of the Spirit's activity. He told us that "all" were in the one place together and then repeated that they were "all" filled with the Holy Spirit. To know who they all were, we look to Acts 1:13-15 and deduce that it included the group of the eleven remaining disciples together with Mary, some other women and Jesus' brothers, and the group of about 120 who were gathered when the disciples chose a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Luke is subtly pointing out that this group of women and men was more than 10 times larger than the band of 12.

In spite of what we might expect, this group, the Church's first mission team, didn't go out preaching, but was sought out by an amazingly diverse crowd of people who heard the commotion. What astonished the multitude whose attention was drawn by the Spirit was not the sound that had originally attracted their attention but the fact that they could understand what the Galileans were saying.

Luke goes to great pains to name the places from which the people in the crowd hailed. Coming from the Roman Empire and beyond, indicated that Jews from all over the diaspora were included among the first witnesses of what God was doing in Jerusalem. And, as had happened in Jesus' ministry, some saw the finger of God in what was happening while others would assume that Galileans must have been a bunch of crazy drunks (Acts 2:15).

The events of the day of Pentecost foretold the rest of the story. Luke gives us the theological history of the beginnings of the Christian movement — he lets us know that it was a fulfillment of God's promises and that it would always be a communal experience. And, as it was instigated by the Holy Spirit it would always be inclusive of women and men from every nation.

PSALMS 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34

When we consider it in detail, our refrain almost summarizes the gist of Psalm 104. We begin by calling on the "Lord," which is a translation of the unpronounceable name of God represented by the Hebrew letters YHWH. God revealed that name to Moses at the burning bush when God sent him to free the people from slavery. Thus, whenever we call upon God as "Lord," we are calling upon God the liberator, God who hears the cries of suffering, oppressed people.

This psalm praises God whose Spirit created the universe, who holds it in being. Singing that the earth is full of God's creatures acknowledges God as the only God, proclaiming that all other things are under God's rule.

In a lovely turn of focus, we ask that our praise please God. Like children who want to make their parents happy, like a lover who offers a free gift to the beloved, we hope that what we do with creation will make the Lord glad.

Above all else, Psalm 104 keeps us aware that all of creation is dependent on God. God is not only the source of our life but also calls us into ongoing creativity. We ask God to renew the face of the earth and God the liberator asks us if we are willing to be a part of it.

GALATIANS 5:16-25

Paul opens this selection from Galatians with the injunction to "walk in the Spirit," which the New American Bible translation used in the Roman Lectionary translates as "live by the Spirit." Scripture scholar and author of Galatians, A Commentary, Paul N. Tarazi explains that in the Hebrew tradition, the five books of Moses were considered halakha, the way to walk in God's covenant, and that Paul's command to walk in the Spirit tells his readers that for Christians the Spirit has replaced the law. The idea of walking in the Spirit suggests that Christian living is a process carried out by people who continually grow in it; it is more than a simple state of being.

Paul sees the process of human life as struggling between two opposing tendencies: flesh and Spirit. In contemporary terms we might think of the flesh as the unbridled ego, the instinct for survival gone so wild that it is driven by an irrational "me first" attitude, infantile in its inability to go beyond self and irrational in its insatiability. The vices Paul lists as examples of this orientation are all self-gratifying and destructive of relationships between individuals and within the community as a whole. As Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr points out in his book *Breathing Under Water*, they are simply perversions of our deepest human desire for communion with God and others. Paul's statement that people ruled by these cannot inherit the kingdom of God is obvious: They don't seek it and have no appetite for it when it is offered.

Paul's alternative to walking under the tutelage of the flesh is to allow God's Spirit to guide us. Paul tells us that this Spirit prays within us, yearning for God's future and interceding with inexpressible groanings, or sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

What Paul describes as walking in the Spirit can also be understood as the metanoia that Jesus called for. It is an alternative life trajectory that comes from the grace of conscious contact with God. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done." Rohr quotes Thomas Merton's explanation of that saying, "The will of God is not a 'fate' to which we must submit, but a creative act in our life that produces something absolutely new."

Paul lists some of the virtues or experiences that characterize people walking in the Spirit: patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, etc. He summarizes this pattern of life saying, "Against such there is no law." There is no pre-determined plot line, no rule book. Walking in the Spirit implies the adventure of discovering God's ever-creative options to anything

and everything that diminishes human life, love and communion with God and neighbor.

JOHN 15:26-27; 16:12-15

These selections from John's Gospel come from Jesus' final discourse. John put this together to give us a vision of Jesus' deepest desires for his followers, everything he wanted them to know before he entered into his glory. What we hear today emphasizes the fact that Jesus knew he couldn't tell them everything. He had set them on the path he had trod, the path of seeking to know and carry out the Father's will in every circumstance. Jesus had shown throughout his life that the Mosaic law, good and holy as it was, could not respond to every question or occasion. Therefore, he promised the disciples an advocate, the guide that had led him.

Jesus calls the advocate the Spirit of truth and promises that this Spirit will guide the disciples. As Advocate, the Spirit was God's emissary to the community, the Spirit who would ceaselessly draw them toward truth, toward perceiving the divine potential in every situation.

The disciples who had been at the table with Jesus and upon whom the Spirit descended after his resurrection surely interpreted his words as a promise to lead them in their life of community and ministry after he was gone. They could not have imagined that people would be reading and pondering these words 2,000 years later. But just as they could not have imagined what would grow from their community and ministry, they could not imagine the new questions life would put to their message. In spite of that, they preserved these words of Jesus for the generations who would come after.

Today, these words hand us the same promise Jesus made to the disciples. In a world they couldn't imagine, we are promised the same Spirit of truth. The greatest challenge we face is to allow God's Spirit to continue working in and through us. In Jesus' lifetime, his adversaries objected to his discernment of truth. Some preferred the clarity and precision of the law to the messy business of seeking how the goal of the law could best be reached in changing and particular circumstances.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis explains that the Christian mission must continue to respond to ever-new circumstances: "The drive to go forth and give, to go out from ourselves, to keep pressing forward in our sowing of the good seed, remains ever present" (#21). In order to meet the challenge of continuing to sow the good seed, Francis reminds us that "God's word is unpredictable in its power," and that "The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking" (#22).

Jesus' promise of the Spirit, our Advocate to us, as we seek to read and respond to the signs of the times, embodies a challenge to never allow ourselves to become stagnant or close off possibilities. Jesus said that the Spirit would speak of the things that are coming. That doesn't mean that Christians will have fortune-telling abilities, but that they can be prophets exercising the gift of recognizing where God is at work in the present and proclaiming how communities can collaborate with the Spirit to bring about the promised future. People who risk believing in the Spirit's activity are ready for Pentecost and God's promise-filled, power producing goading.

Planning: Pentecost

By: Lawrence Mick

The Solemnity of Pentecost marks the end of Easter. For 50 days we have been celebrating our redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

This is a good time to ask yourselves how well your parish has observed the whole season. It is a challenge in our society to maintain any sense of celebration for that long a time. Did your musicians keep Easter songs prominent throughout the Fifty Days? Did the worship environment continue to look like Easter, with flowers and other decorations renewed as often as necessary? Did the preachers keep mystagogy vibrant for the whole assembly, unpacking the implications of what we celebrated during the Triduum? What could you do better next year, and how do you make sure it happens?

However well you have done for the last 49 days, be sure to keep Easter alive on Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not separate from the death and resurrection of the Lord. The first Gospel option for the Mass of the Day makes that rather clear — the Spirit was given on Easter Sunday, even though we continue to celebrate that gift this weekend. So, keep an Easter song or two in the liturgy (perhaps especially at the end of Mass, to mark the end of the season). Keep Easter décor, though you might add some touches of red to it. Keep the paschal candle lit until after all Masses this weekend; then move it to the baptistry.

There are several decisions to be made about texts this weekend. The Missal offers texts for the vigil of Pentecost. One set is for an extended vigil with extra readings (which are found in the Lectionary) and prayers. A second set just has prayers to be used for Saturday evening Masses. For Masses on Sunday, the readings may be taken from Cycle B, but note that you can use the usual selections from Cycle A. The first reading is the same every year, but there are optional texts for Cycles B and C for the other two readings. Be sure that the lectors and musicians are informed well in advance as to which readings are being used at which Masses. On Sunday, the Pentecost sequence is not optional and should be sung before the Gospel proclamation. Check with your musicians for a setting that the assembly can sing. The sequence is not used in vigil Masses, however.

All Masses this weekend conclude with the double Alleluia, just like Easter and the Octave of Easter — another reminder that Pentecost is part of the Easter celebration.

This is also a good day to recognize all those who received initiation sacraments this year: baptism, confirmation, and/or first Eucharist. A simple reception after the Masses can support their resolve to live out their commitments.

Prayers: Pentecost

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

This powerful feast tells us about the early church, but it is also a clarion call for us as a community and as individuals. The images of fire, wind, breath, a cacophony of voices are meant to evoke a collective “fire in the belly” that motivates us to do what we are called to do. Today we are assured that the Spirit is with us, as it was with them on that first enlivening Pentecost.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you appeared among your disciples after the resurrection: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you bestowed upon them peace and the Spirit’s presence: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you share with us the same peace and the same Spirit: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray to be open to the Spirit’s presence that we may share our gifts with the world in which we live.

Minister For all members of the church: May be transformed and willing to be sent by the Spirit’s power ... we pray,

- For those of us who doubt that we each have unique gifts, for those who hesitate or are afraid to share their gifts, and for those who resist the Spirit’s call ... we pray,
- For the courage and wisdom to accept the mighty wind and fiery force of the Spirit, so that we may feel deeply the call to live as witnesses to the power of God’s saving love for all peoples.
- For all families, neighborhoods, workplaces or countries in need or renewal, especially those that appear to be abandoned ... we pray,

- For all places where religious, racial, political or economic conflict has hindered the work of the Spirit to create peace, unity, freedom and justice ... we pray,
- For the many ministries in this parish, and for those who cannot serve others because of illness or other barriers ... we pray,

Presider God of wind and fire, pour out your enlivening Spirit upon us as we are sent forth to serve others in this time and place. Grant us the same courage and determination that you gave to Jesus' followers. It is in his name that we respond and we pray. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle B Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)