

“Blowing the Lid Off”
Pentecost, May 24, 2026
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

I have to admit, I’ve always sort of struggled with this story. Not because I don’t like it. I really do. It’s fun and exciting. When I was a kid we would draw and color pictures of it happening like it’s described. You know, with tongues of fire coming out of the air to land on the disciples. Also, and I don’t think this is always made clear, it happens to a lot of people. We’re told a little earlier that the believers numbered around a hundred twenty, so not just twelve. We’re meant to imagine a big crowd of people pouring out of the house where they’re staying.

So, I think the story’s great. But I’ve always had trouble thinking about it as real. It is so far removed from anything I’ve ever experienced that I have trouble relating to it personally. Also, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church. We’re called the “frozen chosen” for a reason. In the church where I was raised, you would be embarrassed to stand at the wrong time, let alone start shouting or prophesying. We don’t do that sort of thing. We like, to a degree, predictability and structure in our worship.

There are other traditions that are different, more free-floating, but that’s not us. Also, even in the traditions that are more emotional and evocative, there are still rules, maybe implied, that a person’s behavior is supposed to follow. I had a theology professor in seminary who was raised in a fundamentalist, not Pentecostal, church, but one where people were invited to share their testimony during worship. But he noticed growing up that sometimes a person’s testimony wasn’t really acceptable because of how it was presented. He came to realize that there were certain rules that applied; it wasn’t just a free-for-all.

But this story, by comparison to my experience and even to my professor’s, this story is just wild. So, the real problem I have with it is how to integrate it into my understanding of God and how God works in the world. What is this story meant to say about the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s movement in our lives?

I think there are some important clues worth looking at. One is the ambiguous way the people gathered are affected. On the one hand we’re told the disciples spoke in different languages. But on the other we’re told the people outside the house marveled because they heard them in different languages. It’s a subtle difference, but significant. If I speak a different language than you do, and you speak to me in my language then that’s something you and I can share. But suppose someone next to me speaks a third language, and when they hear you they hear their language? This is no longer a private conversation between two people. Suddenly it’s one that everyone can understand no matter what language they speak. That seems to be the phenomenon being described. What really astonished the crowd was, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

So, that’s weird. Something is happening beyond just overcoming language barriers. Because here’s the thing: everyone in Jerusalem, no matter where they lived in the Roman Empire, spoke a common language. The language of the Empire was Greek. The Romans largely

conquered territory that had been Greek territory for centuries, since Alexander the Great. Greek was already an established common language. When Rome conquered a new place, say a city like Ephesus in Asia Minor, the first thing they would do is build a temple dedicated to Caesar. Inscribed in the entryway, in Latin and Greek, would be the story of their salvation through Caesar, the son of god. Latin was the language of the Roman elite, while Greek was the language of common people in the Empire, and Rome wanted to keep it that way.

There is no practical reason why the people at Pentecost needed to hear in their native language. Why is that so important? Back in the late 1800's, a man named Alexander Carmichael, who worked as a taxman in the Scottish Highlands, began collecting prayers and songs and other material in Gaelic that he had heard in his travels. He created something called the *Carmina Gadelica* or "Songs of the Gaels." It was during a time when Britain was essentially eradicating Gaelic from Scotland and Ireland and Wales, and Carmichael wanted to preserve the language somehow. In Ireland, in County Clare, the Irish language is spoken in some families almost exclusively, but for a very long time it was illegal to speak Irish. Today students are required to learn it in school. When Native American children were placed in schools run by missionaries or the U.S. government, one of the first things they learned was their language was forbidden. Students were actually punished for speaking to each other in Navajo or Cherokee or Seneca. Rulers and empires like uniformity. That was true for Rome and for Britain and for our country. Eliminating native languages is an important step to eliminating resistance. The belief is, if you can control how people speak, you can control how they think.

This story in Acts tells us, the Holy Spirit isn't having it. When the Holy Spirit blows through the house where the disciples are staying, it causes an explosion of languages. And it 'puts the Empire on notice. The people's astonishment at hearing their native languages isn't just because it's unexpected; it's because it's dangerous. Little wonder that there were some in the crowd accusing the disciples of being drunk. They weren't just dismissing what they were hearing, they were trying to avoid the wrath of Rome. Rome believed it had control. All they needed was an invincible army and the threat of cruelty in the form of imprisonment and torture. That was called the *Pax Romana*, the "peace of Rome." But the Holy Spirit blows the lid off that lie. The Holy Spirit unleashes a torrent of hope and possibility by opening the crowd's minds to hear in ways they thought was impossible.

That's what happens when the Holy Spirit works among us. It blows the lid off all our assumptions and fears, and sends us out into the streets where people are starving to hear a word of hope. From 1906 to 1909 an event occurred in Los Angeles called the Azusa Street Revival that launched the Pentecostal movement. The revival was led by an African American preacher named W. J. Seymour who was a Holiness preacher from Louisiana. When it began the movement was interracial at a time when Jim Crow was at its height, when lynchings were happening all over the south and in places in the north. It was a rift in the veil of separation between the races. One white preacher at the time wrote in his journal, "the color line was washed away by the blood." But before too long white observers began to criticize the movement and Seymour became convinced that speaking in tongues wasn't enough. Scholar Demetrius K. Williams, in the New Testament commentary *True to Our Native Land*, writes, "Discovering that folks speaking in tongues could still practice racism convinced [Seymour] that it was not tongues

that were most important but ‘the *dissolution of racial barriers* that was the surest sign of the Spirit’s Pentecostal presence.’”

When the Holy Spirit moves among us, the world is changed. Life can no longer continue as it always had. The divisions that are enforced by society through persuasion and coercion are torn down and everyone can hear the message of God’s presence in a new way. We spend so much energy and so many resources maintaining the illusion of control and order. But just below the surface the forces of change, the desire for justice, the promise of good news for the poor and release of captives is bubbling and about to blow. The Holy Spirit comes among us not as a distraction but as a catalyst. It ignites the hope that lives in us for a world no longer dominated by racial or ethnic or cultural or gender divisions but one that values diversity and celebrates our differences. It’s a world that understands the power of hearing in our native languages and isn’t afraid of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Holy Spirit explodes on the world to blow the lid off all our comforts and complacencies. It challenges us to listen with new ears as we hear the good news of God’s love revealed through compassion and empathy for those in need and compels us to speak up for those who are denied justice. The Holy Spirit empowers our sons and daughters to prophesy, to see visions and dream dreams. That’s how this story continues to speak even to us “frozen chosen.” The Spirit inspires us to go into the world with a message of hope to offer against the despair that dominates the lives of so many. We are the inheritors of that movement; the Holy Spirit falls on us and we are given voices to speak so the world can hear and no longer be afraid. That Spirit is in us now. We, too, are God’s people ready to be drenched in God’s Spirit and proclaim a new vision of justice, freedom, and peace.

Amen