

Waiting for Pentecost

Acts 2:1-11

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If the Christian church possessed a birth certificate, the handwriting on it would surely belong to Luke the physician. *Date of birth*: Fifty days after Pass-over. *Time of birth*: Just before the third hour of the day. *Place of birth*: The great city of Jerusalem. *Names of parents*: The Triune God. The certificate would have to be *huge* in order to hold all of the inky footprints—at least twelve sets of them, if not more—since Luke says the believers numbered about 120 at that time. They were “all together in one place,” he says, when a sound like a mighty wind came and filled “the entire house where they were sitting.”

I do not know why they were all sitting there together, but I have recently discovered that my own Episcopal tradition observes something called “The Vigil of Pentecost.” No living person I know has ever attended one, but apparently the idea is the same as the Easter Vigil. You sit up and wait for the gift of God’s Spirit on Pentecost the same way you sit and wait for the gift of New Life on Easter. If you have ever waited for anyone or anything to be born, then that makes a lot of sense. You can’t sleep anyway, and you sure don’t want to be alone. You want to be wide awake when the new thing happens, especially since it may need some help getting out.

You know the story by heart. Fifty days after Easter, the same God who brought Jesus back to life brought those who loved him back to life as well. God came to them in the waiting room where they were all sitting together. God came to them in the wind and in the fire, pouring so much Spirit into them that Spirit poured out of them with the volume turned all the way up. The air above their heads burst into flames. They began speaking in tongues they did not know. Their revival raised such a ruckus that they drew a crowd, as pilgrims from every nation under heaven came to see who was speaking their language. God did not speak that day, at least not in words. Instead, God squeezed sounds out of human beings that they did not know they could make, so that they had to rely on strangers to tell them what they cried out as the Spirit gave them birth.

On that day, Christians say, Christ’s church was born. On that day the orphaned followers of Jesus inherited the same Spirit that had enlivened him and became his communal body in the world. As the third great feast day of the Christian year, Pentecost is our annual reminder of who we are, what great gifts God has given us, and what we are called to do with them.

I don’t know how Pentecost goes in your congregations, but in the ones I

know best there is usually a birthday party in the parish hall, complete with cake, red balloons and singing. The candles on the cake are tame fire compared to the fire of the first Pentecost, but between the bad coffee and the white sugar icing, you can sometimes feel as if there is a flame shooting out of the top of your own head, too.

Even if no one speaks in tongues, it is still a happy time for those of us who call ourselves the Church. Pentecost is the day for doing together what many of us do one by one at our own birthday parties. We celebrate our existence. We thank God for our life. We rejoice that we have been set apart to do something worth doing, and we make a big fuss over God's birthday present even though we already know what is in it. *What do you think it is? You don't suppose it could be...ah! Thanks be to God! The gift of the Holy Spirit, just when we had almost run out.*

I do not remember a Jewish guest ever being present at one of those parties, but this year I had a waking fantasy of Jesus himself showing up at one. He showed up right at the beginning, while the big silver coffee pot was still making rude noises, and after everyone got over the shock of seeing him right there in the parish hall, someone asked him if he would please do them the honor of cutting the cake.

"Delighted," Jesus said. "Whose birthday is it, anyway?"

"Well, ours," someone said, flushing red in the neck. "We're celebrating the first Pentecost."

"The first Pentecost?" Jesus said, licking icing off his thumb. "When was that?"

"*You* know," someone said, thinking she was being teased. "The one Luke wrote about." Jesus looked up at the ceiling and moved his lips like he was counting.

"That would have been my twenty-first Pentecost if I'd made it," he said, looking around at all the puzzled faces. "Umm, did anyone ever tell you that Pentecost is a *Jewish* holiday? See, that's what all of my friends were doing in Jerusalem in the first place. They were there for *Shavuot*, the Festival of Weeks, one of the three great pilgrim festivals of the *Jewish* year."

After he made sure that everyone had a piece of cake, Jesus sat down in good rabbinical fashion and taught them what Pentecost meant before it meant what they thought it meant. (This is my fantasy, remember, so don't blame him if I get anything wrong.) He started with the Festival of Weeks, the annual wheat festival when Jews from all over the Mediterranean brought their first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. Pentecost was a time not only for celebrating God's goodness, he told them, but also for renewing the covenant between God and God's people, since there was a direct connection between the divine gift of Torah and the blessed fruits of the land.

Jews from all over came to Jerusalem to do that, Jesus continued—to re-

member who they were, what great gifts God had given them, and what they were called to do with them. Even though they did not speak the same language, Torah spoke to them all. Torah gathered them from the four corners of the earth and united them in one purpose. Torah was why they were there. So the disciples who gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost were not there to work out the by-laws of their new organization. Fired up by what had just happened on Passover Sunday, they were there to renew their covenant with God. The story on their minds was from Exodus, not Acts.

Since most Christians have been trained to think that sacred stories only count if they are written down, Jesus had to explain that in Jewish tradition, the written account is the beginning but not the end. The oral stories that go with it are like bridesmaids who burnish the beauty of the bride. Take the story about what happened just *before* God revealed Torah to the people at the foot of Mount Sinai, Jesus said. When they told Moses that they were ready to accept God's Word, 120 myriads of angels descended to give each of them a crown and girdle of glory, so that a heavenly radiance shone on all their faces. They would keep it, too, at least until they decided to cash it in on a golden calf.¹

Then Torah came thundering down from the mountain with the force of a hammer striking an anvil, with sparks shooting out all over the place from the force of the blow.

The sound was so terrifying that the people had trouble standing up. They *could not* have stood up, in fact, if God had not sent two angels to support each one of them—one angel to lay a hand upon their hearts so that their souls did not depart and one angel to hold their heads so that they could bear to behold their Maker.²

When they looked, what they saw and heard defied all reason. Each spark that shot out from Torah—each tongue of fire—was the sound of God's Word in a different language so that all who heard it could understand. There were at least seventy sparks flying out from every word, one for every language spoken in the world. When the smoke cleared, Moses' face was lit like a flame and the people—God's kingdom of priests, God's holy nation—had Torah to guide their feet in the way of life. To this day, Jesus said, when Jews celebrate the birth of their faith they remember this story, and the cake *they* bake on Pentecost is in the shape of Mount Sinai.

At this point Jesus got up, dusted the crumbs off his lap and said he had to go. The Christians in the parish hall all sat dumbfounded. A few found their voices to protest, begging him to say whether their Pentecost was a continuation of the old story he had just told them or the start of a whole new one. Wise rabbi that he was, he said they would have to ask someone else about that, that it was just too controversial a question for him to take up at this late date.

Whatever your own answer to that question, the parallels between the sto-

ries are striking. Points of contact include fiery sparks and many languages, but what the two accounts have most in common is the one God, laboring to give birth to one people—to enlighten them, to guide them, to unite them in one purpose. At Sinai, the gift was called Torah. In Jerusalem, it was called Gospel. In both cases, it was God's own Spirit taking form among God's people, and yet all these years later there is not one feast of Pentecost but two, celebrated by two different faith communities with such different experiences of God that most of us have never tasted each other's cakes. I even know a few people who insist that if you eat Moses' cake, then you can't have any of Jesus' cake, and if you eat Jesus' cake, then you are obliged to turn up your nose at the Sinai cake.

The division does not stop there, I am afraid. At last count, there were over nine hundred Christian denominations in the United States alone, many of them with such different experiences of God in Christ that they won't eat each other's cake either. Pentecost doesn't even show up on some of their church calendars, while for others it is right out front on their church signs. Some baptize once with water. Others are baptized by fire every Sunday. Some read their Bibles for the facts. Others read them for the mysteries.

If we could live with these differences then maybe Pentecost would not have such an edge to it, but right now Christians of all sorts seem to be having a hard time with people who don't speak our language. While the things we are fighting about are not negligible, we can behave so hatefully toward one another that it's enough to make you wonder if maybe we aren't entitled to celebrate Pentecost just yet, that maybe we should stick with the Vigil of Pentecost while we sit up waiting for God's Spirit to make us one.

When we dream of unity, plenty of us dream of leading other people to have the same experience of God that we have had so that we can speak freely with one another about God. We are weary of being jarred by one another's language, of being put off by one another's piety. We yearn to reach some kind of common understanding about what God has called us to be and do that will allow us to read scripture together, to worship together, to live together in peace. If pressed, then we might have to admit that the only way we can envision that happening is for others to arrive where we already are, but in the dream, at least, such blessed agreement ushers in the kingdom where we can all sit down to eat one cake at one table at last.

However attractive this dream may sometimes seem, it does not match the revelations at Sinai or in Jerusalem, where both Pentecost stories leave room for people from distant places to hear God's Word in their own languages. These people do not have to understand each other. They just have to understand God, who speaks wind and fire as well as Hebrew and Greek, who knows their sins and pieties along with their dialects and idioms, who has never and who will never stop trying to get their attention by any and all means available.

Once God has gotten through to them—each in their own language—then

arriving at some common agreement about what has God to them said counts for *nothing*, as far as I can tell. In Luke's story we never even find out what all those Parthians, Medes, and Elamites thought they heard the disciples saying, but it hardly matters since that was not what they were excited about anyway. The miracle of Pentecost was not *what* they heard but *that* they heard. Hearing themselves addressed by a bunch of flaming Galileans who should not have been able to address them, the foreigners seemed to understand that it was God's own Spirit at work, striking sparks and removing barriers as only God can do.

The foreigners alone knew what they were hearing. The Parthians did not know what the Medes were hearing any more than the Galileans knew what the Elamites were hearing. Odds are that the Parthian word for "Lord" sounded like gibberish to the Elamites, while the Medes used another word altogether, but—get ready for some more miracle—they did not waste one minute arguing about whose Lord was the real Lord, whose language best captured the truth about God or whose practices were the most biblical.

As different as they were, they were all devout Jews, Luke says, which means that they all believed in one God. Their unity did not depend on their agreement with one another but on their covenant with the same God, by whose deeds of power they had all been transformed no matter what language they used to describe them. While the Parthians no doubt found the Medes lax on some points of Torah and the Elamites over scrupulous on others, and while the Medes and Elamites had their own opinions on such things, they were somehow able, on the day of Pentecost, to trust that God was speaking to them all in different ways. God made them one people by being one God to them all.

I will leave you to decide whether Pentecost really "took" or whether we are back in the waiting room again, sitting up waiting for God to make us one. A third possibility is that Pentecost was never supposed to be a one time thing but was given to us by God as an every year thing—like a birthday—an annual festival for remembering who we are, what great gifts God has given us, and what we are called to do with them. If so, then I hope there is a really huge cake in the parish hall, with enough room on it for "shalom" in every language under heaven. Who wouldn't be delighted to cut a cake like that?³

Notes

1. *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, ed. Louis Ginzberg (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 600.

2. *Ibid*, 603.

3. Barbara Brown Taylor teaches religion at Piedmont College and serves on the Columbia Theological Seminary faculty as Adjunct Professor of Christian Spirituality.