

PENTECOST

Year B

This Bible study was written by Margaret McGhee for Pentecost (B) in 2018.

Acts 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and
glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
shall be saved.'

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

We all know the story of Pentecost, of course. At 9 o'clock in the morning, the disciples gather, and the place where they meet is filled with a rush of wind and tongues of fire, and they speak in tongues that all can understand.

Many churches try to re-create this moment by asking parishioners to join aloud in a portion of the reading in whatever languages they can speak. The experience of listeners to such a cacophony of voices, however, is in many ways the opposite of the piercing clarity of understanding described on that first Pentecost.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel to explain what is happening: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

Discussion Questions

What might Pentecost look like today? Do we dare to see visions and dream dreams?

Of what might those visions and dreams consist?

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

- ²⁵ O LORD, how manifold are your works! *
in wisdom you have made them all; the earth
is full of your creatures.
- ²⁶ Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living
things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great.
- ²⁷ There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan,*
which you have made for the sport of it.
- ²⁸ All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season.
- ²⁹ You give it to them; they gather it; *
you open your hand, and they are filled with
good things.
- ³⁰ You hide your face, and they are terrified; *
you take away their breath, and they die and
return to their dust.
- ³¹ You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth.
- ³² May the glory of the LORD endure for ever; *
may the LORD rejoice in all his works.
- ³³ He looks at the earth and it trembles; *
he touches the mountains and they smoke.
- ³⁴ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; *
I will praise my God while I have my being.
- ³⁵ May these words of mine please him; *
I will rejoice in the LORD.
- ³⁷ Bless the LORD, O my soul. *
Hallelujah!

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

Psalm 104 is a song in praise of Creation and of God's care for all that is. God creates all things—even the uncounted living beings in the depths of the sea, and Leviathan, "made for the sport of it." God sustains all things, giving them "their food in due season," and, at the appointed time, takes away their breath so that they die and return to dust.

The psalmist does not pretend to understand all the mysteries and oddities and terrors of Creation, but nonetheless praises God, rejoices in the Lord, and cries, "Hallelujah!"

Discussion Questions

In what ways do we trust in the goodness of God's Creation? In what ways does it terrify and perplex us?

What do you make of the idea that God created Leviathan "for the sport of it?"

Romans 8:22-27

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

The passage from Romans portrays a quieter Holy Spirit than that of the Pentecost story of Acts. Here we see a Holy Spirit that helps us not in a violent wind or tongues of fire, but through an intercession “with sighs too deep for words.” The Holy Spirit of Romans is more a kindly support and intercessor on our behalf than it is a fiery force that descends upon us, unexpected.

The readers of Romans have only “the first fruits of the Spirit” and wait in hope its complete fulfillment.

Discussion Questions

What do you make of the different portrayals of the Holy Spirit in today’s readings?

What might it mean that “in hope we were saved”—but a hope that is not seen?

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

²⁶“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Commentary from Margaret McGhee

In the Gospel, we find yet another lens through which we can see the Holy Spirit. Here we encounter the Holy Spirit as advocate and guide—an advocate that will testify on behalf of Jesus to the world and that will guide his disciples into truths they are not yet ready to bear.

Jesus tells his disciples that it is to their advantage that he leave them, because only then will the Advocate come to them.

Discussion Questions

What might be the sorts of truths that we ourselves are not yet ready to bear? And how might we listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us in the direction of those truths?

How might we understand the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth”—as contrasted, perhaps, with the fiery flames of Acts or the sighing intercessor of Romans?