

Acts 2:1–21

Ps. 104:24–34, 35b

Rom. 8:22–27

John 15:26–27;

16:4b–15

Spirit-ed Communication

Goal for the Session *Adults will celebrate the Spirit's giving birth to the church through new speaking and hearing even today.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Acts 2:1–21

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Michael H. Floyd

This passage describes the impact of the Holy Spirit's coming in two phases, first on the assembled disciples (Acts 2:1–4) and then on the gathering crowd (Acts 2:5–21). The occasion for the assembly of the disciples is the festival of Pentecost or Weeks, celebrated fifty days following the festival of Passover. Pentecost, originally a harvest festival, eventually came to commemorate the giving of the law at Sinai. The Spirit's manifestation as wind and fire recalls similar images of God's presence and activity in creation, exodus, and covenant making.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Donald K. McKim

Theologically, the Christian church begins to take shape when the Holy Spirit fills those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah, enabling them to proclaim the gospel and to witness to the Christ “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The church emerges by the Holy Spirit, who dramatically establishes a fellowship of faith, calling believers into the household of God to be witnesses to what God has done in Jesus Christ for the purposes of salvation. The church is the place where this new fellowship begins to take shape as it recognizes the gifts of the Spirit in and for all people.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Kristin Emery Saldine

The story of Pentecost is not meant to be a benchmark of what the church should look like on any given Sunday. Rather, it seeks to communicate how important the church is and how inseparable it is from Christ. Every year, on the Day of Pentecost, we are reminded of who we are as a church, what we proclaim, and the source of that proclamation. Pentecost sums up the gospel with simplicity and audacity: Jesus Christ offers salvation to all, and the church exists to proclaim it.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” G. Lee Ramsey Jr.

Significant in this text is the radical social equality of those who receive the Holy Spirit. This becomes even clearer as the story in Acts unfolds. Old and young, women and men, slave and free all receive the power of God to prophesy, see visions, and dream. Occasionally God anoints big dreamers who with their lives and words paint upon a global canvas, renewing visions for human community. But God also anoints ordinary believers like the ones who sit in the pews. They too see visions and dream dreams that can move the church and its surrounding community a little closer to the “Lord's great and glorious day” (v. 20).

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Acts 2:1–21

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- bench or low table
- red fabric
- votive candles, two for each participant; lighter
- copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 3, 2012, unless it will be e-mailed to participants during the coming week

For Responding:

- option 1: newsprint or board and markers
- option 2: collage materials (poster board, marking pens, magazines, glue sticks)
- option 3: hymnals or songbooks

Focus on Your Teaching

Violent winds and “divided tongues, as of fire” may make Pentecost seem far removed from the faith experience of your adults. But what of the need to speak and listen to one another with understanding? What of the hope for experiencing unity within community too often divided or isolated? What of the grace of perceiving that God’s Spirit embraces all, not just the few? The Day of Pentecost unleashes such Spirit-borne possibilities. It does so not only in memory of a day long ago. It invites you and your adults to affirm the Spirit’s presence in your gathering as Christians and the Spirit’s power in your going out as witnesses.

Come, Holy Spirit. Bring your newness and power to my life today. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

In advance, arrange a table or bench in the middle of the group space to serve as a worship table. Cover it with red cloth, the liturgical color for Pentecost, and place the votive candles on it. Adjust the activity if the church fire code does not allow burning candles.

Welcome people as they gather. Introduce visitors or newcomers. Invite participants to relax, close their eyes, and take a deep breath. Lead the following guided meditation (allow for pauses as indicated): *Recall your earliest memory of being in a church community. . . . What are you doing in that memory? . . . Who is with you? . . . How does that memory influence your faith today? . . .* Ask adults to take another deep breath, open their eyes, and remain in a relaxed state.

Affirm that all of us have some starting point—a “birthday” of sorts—for belonging to the church. Call attention to the votive candles. Explain that each person will light two candles. The first candle will mark their “church birthday.” The second candle will be lit to remember someone who played a key role in their coming into the Christian community. Prayerfully light the candles, letting each person speak aloud the name of that other person as they light the second candle.

Affirm that all these candles that are burning commemorate another starting point—another birthday—that is remembered in today’s text and celebrated by the church: the Day of Pentecost.

EXPLORING

Ask for four volunteers to read these portions from Acts 2: verses 1–4, verses 5–11, verses 12–15, verses 16–21. Invite general reactions to the story.

The Hebrew and Greek words for “Spirit” also mean “breath” and “wind.” Consider when and how to bring this information into the conversations around today’s passage.

- ✪ What is familiar to you?
- ✪ What sounds “new”?

Have adults name words or phrases that relate to “hearing” and/or “speaking.” Ask:

- ✪ How is the Spirit involved in both of those aspects of communication?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Pentecost Backgrounds). Review the material on the sheet. In particular, focus the conversations on the ways this information might influence or deepen our hearing and understanding of today’s Acts 2 passage.

Read the excerpts on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 2:1–21). Use the question of each excerpt to prompt discussion. For example, have adults identify “what is important to know” from the information in the “What?” excerpt or “where is God in these words” from the information in the “Where?” excerpt.

OPTION: Form two groups. Assign one group Genesis 11:1–9, the story of the Tower of Babel. Assign the second group Joel 2:18–31, a portion of which is quoted in Acts 2. Have each group read its assigned passage keeping the Pentecost story of Acts 2 in mind.

- ✪ Where are there points of connection in theme between the assigned passage and Acts 2?
- ✪ In what ways does the Pentecost story represent a reversal or an embodiment of the assigned Old Testament text?

Gather the groups together and offer reports of their discussion points and questions.

Have individuals go through Acts 2:1–21 and identify (or mark in their Bibles, if they are comfortable doing so) every occurrence of “speak/speaking” and “heard/hear.” Talk about how God’s Spirit affects or makes possible both, and to what end. Ask:

- ✪ Why are both speaking and hearing important in this passage?

Have participants call to mind their remembrance of their earliest church memory, which they recalled in the opening Gathering activity. Ask:

- ✪ What does it mean for the church to have the narrative of Pentecost as its “birth story”?
- ✪ How does today’s church reflect the Day of Pentecost in how we communicate with one another and with those outside of our circles?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. Led by the Spirit Today

Talk about what it means for participants to be part of a community that not only celebrates its birth in the activity of God’s Spirit but is still led by the Spirit. Invite discussion around the endings adults call out for the following open-ended sentences that you now write on newsprint or a board:

- ✪ We listen to the Spirit when we . . .

**EASY
PREP**

If you choose to display the collage made in option 2 in worship or at some gathering afterward, be sure to coordinate this with those responsible for such activities so that you do not conflict with their plans.

- ✿ We speak by the gift of the Spirit when we . . .
- ✿ The Spirit brings new life to our community when . . .

Challenge adults to choose at least one of those “endings” as a practice they will concentrate on this coming week.

2. Celebrate the Church’s Birthday

Create a collage that depicts the church’s birth at Pentecost. As you make the collage, invite stories of your own church’s “birth.” Weave those stories into the words and images of the collage. Talk about ways to share the collage with others today—perhaps as a “mission moment” in the worship service, or following worship at fellowship time. Let this become an opportunity for the Spirit to engage you and others in fresh hearing and speaking about the church’s birth on Pentecost and in your community.

3. Spirit Songs

Music affords a unique blending of listening and speaking. Its harmonies remind us that community is not always best done in “monotone.” We routinely use music in church to celebrate and to explore our faith. Distribute the hymnals and songbooks your church uses in worship. Sing or read the songs to be sung in worship today. Look at a couple of other songs such as: “Spirit of Gentleness” by James Manley, “Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us” by Janie Alford, or “Wind Who Makes All Winds that Blow” by Thomas Troeger.

Encourage participants to write the words of the song that means the most to them today and to sing or pray it during the week.

CLOSING

Gather around the candles. Recall they were lit in remembrance of the participants’ “birthdays” in the Christian community—and of someone who played an important role in that birthing.

Note that in Acts 2, the Spirit not only comes as wind but as fire. Suggest to participants that the flames on the candles symbolize the Spirit’s work in their lives and in the lives of those who brought them here.

Ask adults to think of another person: one in need of community, one in need of someone willing to listen to them, or one in need of someone willing to speak for them. Ask:

- ✿ What will you do this week to make contact with that one, trusting the word of Acts 2 that Pentecost empowers us for witness and service, for hearing and speaking?

Close with these or similar words of prayer:

God of Pentecost, breathe into us the new life of your Spirit. Open our ears to truly listen, open our lips to speak the truth of your love, open our lives to the Spirit’s leading. Amen.

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Pentecost Backgrounds



Today we celebrate Pentecost as a festival of the church. The roots of Pentecost predate the events of Acts 2, as Pentecost was one of three major pilgrimage festivals in Judaism (see Exodus 34:22–23). The gathering of Jewish pilgrims accounts for the detail in Acts 2 of “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” being in Jerusalem.

What did Pentecost celebrate?

The name “Pentecost” is derived from the Greek prefix *pente-* meaning “five” or “fifty.” According to Deuteronomy 16:1–17, this festival (sometimes called “Festival of Weeks”) took place fifty days after Passover. It marked the completion of the grain harvest that came in late spring. Some see in the symbolism of harvest in the Jewish festival a metaphor for the “harvest” of those gathered into the church on the Acts 2 day of Pentecost.

Yet another tradition associated with Pentecost in later Judaism is the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and thus the creation of a new “covenant” community. Listen to the insight of Donald McKim on this connection to the church’s celebration of Pentecost:

The law was meant to express God’s will and guide the people of Israel. So now, with the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, the church receives God’s Spirit to guide and help and indwell the people of God as they seek to live out God’s will, known in Jesus Christ.

—Excerpted from Donald K. McKim, *Theological Perspective on Acts 2:1–21*, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 6.

Pentecost proclaims that God’s Spirit gathers in covenant community all who respond to the call to follow the Christ by faith, through grace, with love.