

# 50 DAYS

## WEEK 7: Blown Away! The Holy Spirit and Pentecost

**SCRIPTURE: Acts 2:1-21, 4:23-31**

*By Carol Duerksen*

### DAY 1

I know exactly where I dipped myself into the mysterious pool of the Holy Spirit for the first significant amount of time. I was with some high school friends in an “upper room”—otherwise known as the upstairs farmhouse bedroom of my friend Karen. There, a group of us Mennonite girls dared to read the book *They Speak with Other Tongues* by John Sherrill.

The book opened our eyes and souls to an aspect of the Holy Spirit that was new, unusual, intriguing, and mysterious. We studied the book with our minds, curious to know if our spirits would follow. Would we speak with other tongues too? And if we did, would that make us more spiritual than before?

Fast forward many years. My friend Nita and I were at a Mennonite conference, along with about 120 other participants. At one point, as our Bible study leader Bryan Moyer Suderman sang one of his songs, Nita got up and left the room.

“The Spirit was there in his song, and it was so strong, I knew I would go down,” she said. I had to leave. I didn’t want to make a scene. When this happens, my white friends always rush over because they think I am having a seizure. But my Hispanic friends know. . .it’s the Spirit.”

Nita didn't always know the Holy Spirit that way. When she was a youth pastor in a Mennonite church, that wasn't part of her worship experience. But when she became involved with church planting and ministry in Hispanic congregations, she was introduced to a new way of worshipping that "blew her away." She absorbed this "new wine."

## CHILDREN:

Stand in front of a fan, or outdoors if it is a windy day. Talk about the following: What does the wind feel like? Do you know where it comes from? Do you know where it goes? Can you see it? Can you see what it does? Do you have to see it in order to know that it is **real**?

That's how it is with God's Spirit. We can't see it. But just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't **real**. We feel it when we feel love coming to us from other people, or when we just **know** inside of ourselves that God loves us.

Say the following, and then finish it: "I have felt the Holy Spirit when \_\_\_\_\_."

## YOUTH AND ADULTS

What has been your experience with the Holy Spirit?

Which words describe your thoughts about the Holy Spirit? Comfortable. .  
.curious. . .afraid. . .best friend. . .mysterious. . .companion. . .insight-giver. .  
.distant. . .other?

# DAY 2

The Pentecost story is one of disruption, high energy, noise, confusion, miracles, tongues of fire, different languages, some who "get it" and some

who don't. It is a story that is often called the birthday of the church; a story that some of us find inspiring for today, and others find it to be mysterious and hard to understand.

With that kind of beginning, the early church was off to a high energy start, to say the least. The church seemed to be operating quite fluidly and depended on direction from the Spirit as decisions were made on how and where to worship, who should speak and what should be said in worship, who should lead the community and how, who should relate to outsiders and how, what to say when under threat. The tensions inherent in this free-flowing approach to community life are mentioned when Paul offers instructions in 1 Corinthians to bring the worship life of the community to some order. <sup>i</sup>

The Spirit-led freedom spawned the shattering of different religious and cultural patterns with which the people had grown up, including crossing the Jewish-Gentile barrier, making advances against sexism, and moving people toward radical economic sharing. At the same time, this somewhat "loose" mode of operating could be problematic. It's clear that in the later New Testament writings, that fluid Spirit-driven freedom is giving way to a more structured communal life. Large parts of the church developed practices and at times a theology in which the Spirit's role was more confined. Structures were established for everything including teaching, worshiping, leading, and decision-making. <sup>ii</sup>

In today's world, we have both highly structured and charismatic approaches to worship. We have Mennonites with a cultural history of being "the quiet in the land," like Nita knew at Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, and we have Mennonites with a culture that has them standing and falling and praising God. Thanks be to God for our diversity!

## **CHILDREN**

Look at the children's activity sheet and practice your detective skills. Can you discover what the three languages are on the sheet? Then follow the instructions to find out what the people were talking about in their different languages!

## **YOUTH AND ADULTS**

What is your experience with structured versus not-so-structured worship experiences and leadership of a faith community? With which approach are you most comfortable, and why?

Would you be willing to try different ways of experiencing the Spirit, either in a worship setting or on your own? If yes, how can you make that happen?

## DAY 3

Whether you look at this story as a phenomenon that was good for the early church but not something that happens now, or as an example of the Spirit's power that is available to be experienced today, one thing is sure—it is the story of a God who is big and beyond anything that we can imagine. It is a story of a Spirit who infuses people with high-voltage spiritual energy that takes them places they have never been before. The observers at Pentecost thought the disciples were drunk on new wine, and that was true . . . the new wine of the resurrected Jesus flowed through the Holy Spirit to them, and oh yes, they were drunk like never before!

More than one interpretation can be offered for what happened in the upper room at Pentecost. No single formulation can do it justice. We are listening to the account of something strange, beyond the bounds of imagination, miraculous, inscrutable, an origin which, as far as Luke is concerned, was the only way one could “explain” the existence of the church. No flat, prosaic explanation can do justice to the truth of how the church came into being and how the once timid disciples found their tongues to proclaim the truth of Christ. <sup>iii</sup>

Yes, Pentecost is cause for celebration! Celebrate the birthday of the church! Celebrate that today, with all of its flaws and disagreements, the church lives on! Celebrate that today, timid disciples are finding their tongues to proclaim the truth of Christ! Celebrate!

## CHILDREN

Invite children to complete this sentence: "God is so big that \_\_\_\_\_." If possible, don't use words. Draw, paint, go outdoors and collect symbols of their response, do an interpretive dance, etc. Find ways to express this reality.

## YOUTH AND ADULTS

Do you tend to spend more time celebrating the church or criticizing it?

If Luke were to convey a story about your church, what would he say?

Have you ever been so "high" on Jesus/God/Holy Spirit that people might think you were drunk? Does that idea intrigue you, disgust you, disturb you, challenge you?

## DAY 4

*By Laurie Oswald Robinson*

Many people don't know that New York City has more than fifteen Mennonite congregations flung throughout the city of eight million people. Each year when I lived there, from 1986 through 1998, the congregations gathered for a multicultural celebration hosted by the New York City Council of Mennonite Churches.

No matter their background, participants experience the language, culture, and worship of people who are Latin-American, Caucasian, African-American, Ethiopian, and Asian. You can hear the English interpretation of a Spanish sermon, see the gently swaying bodies of an Ethiopian choir, and hear children from many lands sing the same song.

I'd write or call home about these days, always conveying the amazement of this modern-day Pentecost. I often got the feeling that my family and friends couldn't quite believe this scenario. And to be honest, it bordered on a surrealistic experience for me too!

In Acts 2:1-13, we read of a similar kind of feeling about the rush of violent wind and tongues of fire, which both united the new people

of God and echoed the birth of the old people of God at the exodus. Some considered the infilling of the Holy Spirit and the ability to understand one another's languages as God's power; others saw the same event as a drunken brawl (v. 13). The one view was full of faith; the other view, full of fear.

Whatever fears we had about one another in the city, that annual gathering went further than anything else in our urban experience to transform those fears into faith. Individually, we were tiny candles, dwarfed by the city's neon. Together, we became a huge fire of God's heat and light, renewed in the Spirit's empowerment.

## CHILDREN

Find "VeggieTales: God is Bigger Than The Boogie Man" on YouTube and listen to it. Talk about the things that are scary for you and how God is bigger than anything that scares you.

## YOUTH AND ADULTS

- Laurie says that "The one view was full of faith; the other view, full of fear." How did this apply to what we are experiencing with the pandemic? Do you find yourself more full of faith or fear? From your perspective, what is the difference between being fearful and endeavoring to be safe?
- When was the last time you were in a culturally mixed setting during worship? What did you learn about unity amidst diversity in God's family?
- Ask God for a new humility that recognizes that your light of faith burns brighter when joined with others in the fellowship of the Spirit.
- If you are part of an urban, multicultural fellowship, invite a person to your worship service who has never had such an opportunity. If you live in a homogeneous setting, expose yourself to a more diverse worship event.

*Day 2 reflection from Now It Springs Up; Carol Duerksen, Michele Hershberger, Laurie Oswald Robinson; WillowSpring Downs 2007.*

# DAY 5

*By Laurie Oswald Robinson*

During a period of my life that was full of anxiety, I received counseling from a therapist who helped me understand “mindfulness,” or staying present to the moment. She helped me to lessen anxiety by three steps: paying attention to my thinking and altering it toward a positive end; praying to a God who is present; and being grateful for circumstances unfolding each day, even though some circumstances are less than pleasing or happy.

The idea of being mindful about each day is introduced in Acts 2:14-21. Peter’s speech to the Pentecost crowd focuses on the “last days.” Two millennia later, many biblical scholars interpret “last days” to mean the “day of the church,” which began at Pentecost. Peter quotes from Joel, an Old Testament prophet, who, even though he lived thousands of years before the disciple, was discussing what would happen in the last days.

Joel and Peter gave their perspectives in very different ages, yet they seemed to think it was important to be open and mindful about what is possible when God pours out the Spirit on all flesh: Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men—and women—will see visions; your old men—and women—will dream dreams.

The ability to prophesy, envision, and dream blossoms when people are attuned to God’s Spirit in the present and entrust the past and the future to God. Whether we are living in the last days is not nearly as important as living the present day as if it were our last.

## CHILDREN

Several years ago, when Pastor Rosie Jantz was teaching the preschool class during Faith Formation at Tabor Mennonite Church, the lessons focused on God’s presence. One of the activities to reinforce this was to repeat together, “Have no fear, God is here.” Every Sunday morning, they began class with this prayer, first with an audible whisper then gradually increasing in volume. Soon their sweet little voices were proclaiming together, “Have no fear, God is here!” They practiced this prayer so that when they experienced times of feeling alone, being afraid, or feeling sad, they would remember; “Have no fear, God is here.” Anytime is a good time to thank God for being near and being here! One day a parent questioned what Pastor Rosie was

teaching their child, then proceeded to tell her about the night their child began calling loudly after being tucked in for the night. When they went to check, the child told them she was practicing what she had learned to pray -- "Have no fear, God is here."

Children, practice saying this quietly and then louder and louder. Learn it so that you can say it whenever you feel alone, sad or afraid.

## YOUTH AND ADULTS

- Reflect on one event you are anxious about regarding the past, and one event you are anxious about regarding the future. Record these anxieties in a prayer journal or notebook. Take time to entrust these situations to God, asking for the grace to live in today only and to be open to how God's Spirit wants to work in your life now.
- Identify three different people—young, middle age, and older--whom you can encourage to be open to God's Spirit working in their life today.

*Day3 reflection from Now It Springs Up; Carol Duerksen, Michele Hershberger, Laurie Oswald Robinson; WillowSpring Downs 2007.*

## DAY 6

*By Katherine Goerzen*

It is a well-rehearsed story within the church to speak of the disciples' inability to understand Jesus in the Gospel accounts. We often marvel and scratch our heads at their severe cluelessness. How could they travel around with Jesus all of that time, see his miraculous signs, hear all that he preached and taught, and still not get it?

But another common thread throughout the preaching and teaching of the church is to compare ourselves to the disciples. We're not so different from them, are we? We also fall short. We also fail to understand. We have God's Word but don't always know how to respond to Jesus' calling for our lives.



In the book of Acts, the former disciples-turned-apostles are not bound by incompetence or cluelessness. They're preaching with boldness! They are no longer jostling for authority, but serving one another! They're casting out demons, healing the sick, and sharing their possessions with everyone who has a need! They share God's goodness with everyone! They even go to their deaths boldly proclaiming Jesus Christ and generously offering forgiveness to their executioners. But that's getting ahead of the story.

The disciples had gathered in the upper room, praying and waiting for something they couldn't possibly have anticipated or imagined. Suddenly from heaven there came the sound of a rushing wind that filled the entire house. Tongues of flame rested upon each of the disciples, filled them with the Holy Spirit, and empowered them to preach God's deeds of power in many different languages.

We see the vast array of people who had gathered in the city (Acts 2:9–11). Yet each of them was able to understand the mighty works of God in their own language! The tower of Babel has been reversed! The scattered languages and nations have been drawn back together!

And the Church was born, as believers were filled and empowered and transformed by the Holy Spirit so that they would be sent to embody, proclaim, and live out God's Good News.

Throughout the book of Acts, we see how God's Spirit moves in the life of the early church, transforming a group of average folks into bold apostles and mighty preachers. We see how the Spirit falls upon all who have gathered: the men and the women (2:17–18), the young and the old (2:17), the people of every nation and tongue (2:9–22). Through the power of the Spirit, God's new creation has come among them. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

When the Holy Spirit comes to us, one thing is certain: The Holy Spirit does not leave any of us the same. And if we identify with the stumbling disciples, so too are we called to experience the transformed life of the bold apostles, for God's Spirit still comes among us! Because of the Spirit's power, we cannot remain stumbling disciples forever. God's Spirit bursts forth into our lives, transforms us, and

sends us into the world to continue Jesus' mission of forgiving sins, healing diseases, and speaking words of peace and encouragement wherever divisions arise. We are sent as God's witnesses to proclaim the good news of God in the city, the countryside, even to the very ends of the earth.

Let us wait and watch for the surprising ways God's Spirit will burst into the world bringing transformation, courage, and the good news of Jesus.

## CHILDREN

**Fire and Flames Stained Glass:** Help your child draw a large flame on a white sheet of copy paper. Outline the flame in black crayon. Use orange, red, and yellow colors to fill inside the flame. Then continue to draw small sections of various colors surrounding the flame, and outline them in black. Be sure to completely fill the paper so there are no white spaces. Then dip a cotton ball into a small amount of vegetable oil, and rub over the entire picture, making sure that it is saturated with oil. Allow it to dry on newspaper (it may take up to 12 hours.) A black construction paper frame can be added to the picture. There will be a glossy sheen to the picture that, when hung up on a window, makes it appear to be like a piece of stained glass.

## YOUTH AND ADULTS

- How might the Holy Spirit be bringing transformation to your life?
- Is transformation part of what happens in your church? If so, what are examples of that? If you aren't sure, what needs to happen? What role can you play in inviting Holy Spirit transformation in your congregation?

# DAY 7

A skit to act out with your family.

**PROPS:** Small notebook, pencil, balloons, piñata, birthday cake

**CHARACTERS:** A Detective and another person

Detective looks around at piñata, balloons, cake, other party items, and comments on them, wondering whose birthday it is?

Person strolls in, carrying more decorations or food for the party.

Detective (to Person): Hello! I am a Detective of Divinity. I am trying to detect what's going on here! Who's having a party?

Person: Oh, haven't you heard? It's for the church! It's for God's people!

Detective: The church? I didn't know the church *had* a birthday!

Person: Everybody has a birthday! Don't you have a birthday?

Detective: Well, of course! But I am not the church!

Person: Ah ha! Gotcha! You *are* the church!

Detective: I am?

Person: Aren't you a Detective of Divinity?

Detective: You betcha!

Person: If you are looking for God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, then you are a part of the church!

Detective: Well, if you put it that way . . . then of course, I am!

Person: So, would you like to know what happened on the birthday of the church?

Detective: I am a detective! Of course, I want to know! (pulls small notebook and pencil out of a pocket)

Person: The Holy Spirit surprised everybody!

Detective: How?

Person: Let's find out!

Read the story in Acts 2:1-21 from a children's Bible or another Bible, explaining as necessary to your child. Then have a party and celebrate!

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<sup>i</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, year A, vol. 3, *Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1, Propers 3–16* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>iii</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 29.

*Parts of these reflections on Pentecost are excerpted from "Nighttime Sleuthing and More!" a 5-session unit of multi-age curriculum (preschool, children, youth and adults) available online from Springs Forth Faith Formation, Inc. See more at [springsforth.com](http://springsforth.com) or email [springsforthfaith@gmail.com](mailto:springsforthfaith@gmail.com)*