

Merry Christmas  
Acts 2: 1-21  
Genesis 11: 1-9

Happy Birthday to you all! Or as the title of the sermon oddly declares, Merry Christmas!

This day – Pentecost – marks what has come to be called the birthday of the church, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples just as Jesus had promised in the Gospel of John. *...I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...the Holy Spirit.*

**God is doing something new and different at Pentecost**, the birth of the church, just as God did something unexpected at Christmas, the birth of Jesus.

- First, the Holy Spirit unifies a diversity of people. This child, who began life when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, drew the world to himself in the stable birthplace – not only lowly shepherds but also wealthy wise men.
- Second, the Holy Spirit blends time, draws past into present. The Jewish people were expecting a Messiah in the ancestral line of David, an anointed one who would reign with God's justice and righteousness. Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, is that one.

**At Pentecost, also, the Holy Spirit unifies a diversity of people and draws past into present.**

Jews from all over have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. By this time in their history, the Jews have been scattered around the known world in the Diaspora, the dispersion. But at these festival times, they come back to the city which is central to their faith. It is hot, crowded and noisy – the cooking smells of ethnic foods, varieties of dress and a mix of languages.

The disciples of Jesus have gathered together; there may have been 120 of them at this point. Holy Spirit descends upon them and a tongue of fire rests upon each one so that they can speak other languages – real languages, not gobbledygook. And the crowd then can hear the word of God in their own language.

We heard Adam read the story from Genesis about how at the tower of Babel the multitude of languages came into being. Now we hear how the Holy Spirit has the power to speak to each one of them, not to make one language out of many, but to pervade each language, each culture. The divisions in humanity are being healed and a new family – the church – is being born. The Holy Spirit unifies a diversity of people.

And then the Holy Spirit draws past into present, keeping traditions, yet with this new twist. We can enumerate the allusions to ancient Hebrew scripture.

- First, Peter makes a clear reference when he quotes the prophet Joel: *'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...then everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'*
- Second, the concept of creation in Genesis. Not just the creation of languages at Babel, but creation itself. The rush of a violent wind - the world began when the Spirit hovered over the chaotic waters and the breath, the *ruah*, the voice of God said let there be light. The Holy Spirit is life-giving.

- Then, the implicit reference to experiences that Moses had: tongues of fire - the angel of the Lord appears to him in a burning bush that is not consumed by the fire and God promises to deliver his people out of slavery. The gathering of the disciples *in one place* suggests that they were still fearful, still meeting secretly and this recollects the idea that Moses kept going up to the mountaintop alone and in a cloud to meet with God and take back the commandments. We also know that at this Feast of Weeks did commemorate the giving of the Torah to Moses. Altogether then we see confrontation with God, the Holy Spirit, and covenant renewal.