



Pentecost
May 24, 2026
Day of Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead
Acts 2:1-21

Today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost—in other words, the birthday of the church. While our reading from Acts is one of the most familiar readings in all of Scripture, the circumstances are anything but familiar. Even in the liveliest, most spirit-filled churches I have ever worshiped in, I have yet to see tongues of fire sitting on anyone's head. And never, ever have I witnessed 3000 baptisms in response to Spirit-filled preaching—which is what happens later in the chapter. Yet, Pentecost is part of our story, and we are part of the ongoing work of the church that was birthed that day.

As believers, we continue the work of the church whenever we devote ourselves to the study of God's Word, whenever we pray, worship, have meals together, and share our common life as a diverse community unified by Christ's love. When we do these things with glad and sincere hearts

and **believe** that the gift of the Holy Spirit is already ours—already working to make us into the people Christ intends for us to be—we may be surprised by what the Spirit may accomplish in the world through us. Do we **believe**? Do we **expect** transformed lives—our own included? Do we **hope** the Spirit will grow the church in **surprising** ways still today? Or have we given up hope?

Thom M. Shuman is a Presbyterian pastor and poet whose prayers, liturgies, and devotions are used by people throughout the world. I often refer to his written prayers and other lectionary resources. In one resource, *Fire and Bread*, he contributed a monologue that I wish to share with you this morning. It is entitled, “The Surprising Thing About Pentecost.”¹

What?

Who’s there?

Oh, it’s you.

Yes—the Teacher told me you would be coming round. I was waiting for you and must have dozed off. Now, let me see. You want to know what happened on that day. Oh, it was so long ago. Of course, you’ve come to the right person. A lot of folks will tell you they were in the city that day. But I was a lifelong resident of Jerusalem—in fact, my house was right next door to where Peter, James, John and all the rest used to gather for their meetings.

That fact alone surprised a lot of us. I mean, the followers of Jesus staying in the very city where he had been put to death! Not that they caused any trouble, mind you. They obviously weren’t the band of zealots that everyone had thought—or hoped—they would be. If they were up to something in that city, the authorities would have known about it pretty quick, let me tell you. Between the Roman spies, Herod, and the council of priests, you never knew who was watching you.

Anyway, it was Pentecost. Nowadays, everyone associates it with this new faith: the great day when the Church was born. But people forget that we Jews have been celebrating Pentecost for a very long time. First, it was an agricultural festival—to celebrate the first harvest of the year and to give thanks for God’s blessings. Over the years, though, it became more a celebration of God’s gift of the Law to the people.

Every year, thousands of Jews from all over the region returned to Jerusalem to celebrate their religious heritage—to dance, to sing, to reminisce, to gather together for worship in the Temple. So, it was not all that surprising that there were so many people around that day, so many excited people, so many people eager to rejoice and party.

Peter and the others---oh, there were probably only a hundred of them at most—had gathered at

the house to pray and worship together... Anyway, they were praying and worshipping—I could hear them through the open windows—when, suddenly, there was the strangest sound. First, it was just a hint, a whisper of a breeze. Then, the wind raced down the streets, rushing past the houses, sounding like a thousand chariots coming at us.

One of the neighbors later said it sounded like the first day of creation must have sounded when God breathed upon the earth and the waters. I tell you, I dropped my tools and ran out into the street—just like everyone else.

Huh?

Of course we were surprised! Actually, most of us were pretty frightened. I've never heard a noise like it since that day, and quite frankly I hope I never will. Then I heard someone shout: 'Look at the house!' meaning the house where Jesus' people were. The doors and the windows were wide open—we could see in quite clearly. How can I describe it? It looked as if flames—tongues of fire is what Luke called them later, I think—were dancing about the room. At first I thought the cooking oil had caught fire and exploded. But then I noticed that nothing was burning...and that no one—I mean NO ONE—in the house was hysterical or even frightened. No, they just stood and watched as the flames filled the room; and the flames seemed to touch—without burning them—every single person in that house.

It was an incredible sight! We were rubbing our eyes, pinching ourselves, looking at one another in wonder and fear. Then—the words came. I think it was Peter at first, but then John, and then someone else, and then another, until all the disciples—every single person in that house—were talking and chattering away.

A man in the back of me shouted: 'They must be drunk!' But a man standing near me said: "No. I understand what he's saying. He's speaking a Mede dialect.' A rabbi corrected him. 'No, my son, that's Aramaic." I heard a woman mutter under her breath, 'Men! It's clearly Egyptian they are speaking.' Me, I'm no good at languages. It was all Greek to me.

But everybody—and I mean everybody—Roman, Jew, Turk, Cyrenian, Galilean, all the different nationalities that were standing there in the street—heard—each in his or her native tongue—what the followers of Jesus were saying. It was an awesome display of power and majesty. I felt like one of the ancient Israelites must have felt when God spoke to Moses from the mountaintop, in thunder and lightning.

Well, you know the rest. Peter came out of the house and spoke to all the people standing in the street. He had a quiet crowd—believe me. What a sight: This uneducated fisherman speaking to a crowd composed of every race and nation in the world.

You know, some say the Church was born on that day. Others say it was the day that the Holy Spirit came down. Me, I think it was the day Peter became the person God intended him to be. What a speech—so simple but powerful. It was so overwhelming that 3,000 people were baptized into the faith! Yes, it was a day of incredible drama, a day of miracles, a day in which lives were changed...

What? Sorry?

What surprised me most?

The most surprising thing about Pentecost was that the disciples WERE NOT SURPRISED! I mean, the wind didn't scare them, the flames didn't panic them, the crowds didn't intimidate them. It was as if they expected it all to happen to them: the rush of wind, the touch of the flames, the speaking in tongues, the powerful sermon, the response of the people. It was as if someone had told them ahead of time that, if they only trusted, if they only believed, if they only had faith, it would happen just like it did.

Perhaps Rev. Shuman is right. Perhaps the question Pentecost still places before the church is do we actually expect the Holy Spirit to move among us—not necessarily through rushing wind or tongues of fire—but through transformed hearts—through courage where there is fear—through compassion where there is division—through communities becoming more generous, more just, more loving?

Somewhere along the way, many of us were taught to lower our expectations of God. To settle for survival instead of transformation. To expect routine instead of resurrection. But the disciples expected something. They gathered with open hearts. They prayed. They waited. They trusted that Christ's promise was real. And maybe Pentecost invites us to become that kind of church again: a people open to surprise, open to change, open to holy disruption, open to the Spirit still moving in and through ordinary people like us. Because the surprising thing about Pentecost may not be that the Spirit came long ago—but that the Spirit is still coming even now. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Silent Reflection]

¹ Thom M. Shuman, *Fire and Bread*, edited by Ruth Burgess, 149-152.
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