

# Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

## When The Spirit Comes, Pentecost Sunday, Year A, B, and C

Pentecost Sunday Sermon

Acts 2:1-21

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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I want to begin my reflection today by asking you to recall the first time you saw a movie with special effects. ... I'm old enough to remember seeing Cecil B. DeMille's, "Ten Commandments," when it was first released. Sitting in the darkened theatre as a child, watching Charlton Heston lead the people between the walls of raging water as they crossed the Red Sea. It was pretty amazing back then. But it was pretty primitive and hokey by today's standards. Back then we could see the seam where the two images were glued together. Today, special effects must be seamless; must be an integrated aspect of the story.

Which brings me to the story of Pentecost that we heard today. In a way, the special effects of Pentecost – the wind, the flames, the talking in different languages – these are a bit primitive and hokey by today's standards; and they can get in the way of our hearing the story. We'd be missing the point if we went home today talking about the special effects: What do you think about speaking in tongues? Why don't we see more of that sort of thing today? Etc.

So instead of talking about the special effects of Pentecost, let's talk about the underlying story. How does Pentecost fit into our Christian story?

To put Pentecost into its context, we have to think back 50 days to the story of the arrest, trial, execution and resurrection of Jesus. These events all took place at the time of the celebration of the Passover.

Passover is the celebration / remembering / honouring of the mighty action of God in rescuing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and leading them out toward a promised land. After they had successfully escaped the Egyptian army by miraculously passing through the Red Sea; they came to Mount Sinai where Moses was given the Ten Commandments. The receiving of the Ten Commandments is what Shavuot / Pentecost celebrates.

So our Christian story of Easter – Pentecost, receives its foundational meaning from these Jewish roots of escape from slavery – Passover – and receiving of the Ten Commandments – Shavuot.

Now as Christians, it is important for us to understand that for Jews, the Ten Commandments are not some onerous burden of nit picking legalisms. They are the seeds of life! Having been freed from slavery, the Ten Commandments answer the questions:

What now shall we do with our freedom?

How, now that we are free, shall we also live fully, deeply, truly?

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The Ten Commandments answer that question by giving clear, concrete descriptions of how to live as God intends: with joy and justice, service and satisfaction, duty and delight. At Passover we gain our freedom to live, at Shavuot we gain the knowledge of how to live well.

And. There is a hidden reinforcement of this theme in the number 50. In the elaboration of the Fourth Commandment to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy, the Sabbath rest was extended to a year of rest for the land every seventh year; and after a Sabbath of Sabbath years – that is after seven times seven, the fiftieth year was to be a year of Jubilee – the forgiveness of all debts; the return of all land to the original holders; and release of those who had sold themselves into slavery for the payment of debts. The memory of this Jubilee Year echoes in each Pentecost.

We begin with freedom from slavery; we come to learning how to live in freedom and right relations with each other and with the land. And. Knowing in advance that we are faulty and frail, and will fail at this high calling, there is a built in reminder and re-balancing.

Fifty days ago you were freed from slavery. Slavery to those who would try to rule your life. Slavery to memories and scars from the past. Slavery from fear of death. Slavery from fear of failure; fear of loneliness; fear of rejection. Slavery to your crazy calendar.

But haven't we already fallen back into our old patterns? Haven't we already forgotten how to live well with this freedom?

Pentecost comes to remind us of this, and to remind us that we have not been abandoned. Yes, we do not have Jesus with us anymore, but the Spirit of God is here with us. And this has an important consequence for us.

After a long time of only being followers and learners, Jesus had left the disciples. But they did not scatter and go back to their separate homes. Instead, they continued to meet together, "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Like us, they too were probably stumped about what to do next. And like us, they were probably certain that they were not up for whatever was next. Like us they probably were starting to revert back to the familiar ways.

But they stayed and prayed together. And over the course of a week after Jesus had gone, and then eight days, and then nine days, and then ... from the context of their staying and praying together; from the context of their being with Jesus; from the context of their having received freedom from slavery and a vision for living well; from this context came the Spirit of truth to give life to their hearing, seeing and speaking – to their whole being.

Last week, I was talking with Sandra (who was recently ordained), recalling my experience of my first congregation. It takes many years of training to become a minister, and so for a long time I was a "student" minister, not a real one. I was always the learner. There was always someone else nearby who was the "real" minister. But on my second day in my new congregation, someone came to "speak with the minister." And it suddenly dawned on me, "Oh, I guess that would be me!" That little light bulb of insight was a tiny flame of the Holy Spirit guiding me into truth. Guiding me into a new self-understanding, and into a new relationship with the person who had come to speak with the minister. Guiding me to live well with this new freedom of being a "real" minister.

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As long as we don't get distracted by the special effects of Pentecost – as long as we stay focused on the story – we will remember today how far we have already wandered from the freedom received only 50 days ago. We will remember how desperate is our need to learn how to live well together and with all of creation. We will remember that when someone comes and asks to know Jesus, that it will be you and I who make the introduction. We will remember how badly we need one another to stay together and pray together to help us to stay open to the Spirit of truth. And when the Spirit comes with her light bulbs of awareness and flames of energy, we will remember and give thanks for Pentecost.

This is Good News. Amen.

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