

## **Pentecost Sunday, 2026**

### **Sermon: “Infilling and outpouring” (Acts 2: 1-21; Johnm20:19-23)**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

As you listened to today’s lectionary readings, you may have wondered, “Did the disciples receive the Spirit on Easter evening or on the day of Pentecost?”

The passage from John 20 describes Jesus appearing to the disciples on the evening of Easter day. He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” But the text of Acts 2 describes the Spirit coming fifty days later with wind, fire and public proclamation.

So, which is it? We might think that Luke, the author of Acts, and John the evangelist, were contradicting each other; in fact they were not. Rather, they were making different theological points. For John, the gift of the Spirit is inseparable from the resurrection of Jesus. The risen Christ breathed the Spirit into the disciples as the first act of new creation. He filled them inwardly with His new life. On the other hand, we have Luke’s account. He was emphasizing the anointing of the disciples by the Spirit, the public empowerment of the Church for mission. While John focuses on the source and the inward enlivening of the Spirit, Luke focuses on the outpouring, the outward, discernible manifestation of the Spirit. And together, the two accounts give us a fuller understanding of Pentecost.

Let's begin with John's account, which starts with the description, "When it was evening of that day, the first day of the week ..." That day was Easter Day, the day of resurrection. But by calling it "the first day", the evangelist draws attention to the opening words of Genesis. And he opens and shapes his gospel with creation imagery, stating in chapter 1, verse 1, "In the beginning was the Word ..." So, on Easter Day, on the first day of a new week, in fact, on the first day of a new age, the risen Christ stood amongst his disciples.

But we are told that these disciples were gathered behind locked doors in fear that they might meet the same fate as the man they had been closely following for the past three years. In the framework of John's gospel, the locked doors symbolize more than physical security, as the disciples remained enclosed within the old world, still governed by fear, death and misunderstanding. Despite the locked doors, the risen Jesus enters.

John provides us no explanation regarding the mechanics of how Jesus did so, but he provides revelation, that resurrection life is not constrained by what constrains ordinary human existence. Jesus says, "Peace be with you." In John's gospel, peace is a major theological gift. Earlier in chapter 14, Jesus gave this promise, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." The peace that Jesus gives is not simply emotional tranquillity, or the absence of conflict, his peace is the gift of restored relationship with God.

Then Jesus showed to the disciples his hands and his side. They could see his wounds. Through this visual aid, Jesus was demonstrating a crucial fact, that the risen Jesus is the same person as the crucified Jesus. This is not some spiritualised replacement or abstract triumph over suffering. It was their crucified Lord who was standing amongst them. Resurrection did not negate Christ's crucifixion but confirmed and vindicated it. Jesus is the perfect sinless man who was crucified by evil men but the death they inflicted on him could not hold him. His wounds were marks of his identity.

And Jesus then repeated, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is mission theology in John's gospel. The disciples did not invent their own purpose. Their mission was based on that of Jesus because, as Jesus was sent by the Father, so now they were charged with and even incorporated into that same divine mission. The Church exists as a community sent out to bless the world.

And then came the climactic act: Jesus breathed on his disciples. John used a highly significant, rare and dramatic Greek word *ενεφυσησεν*. Just as the NIV translation of the Bible is commonly used in our time, the Jews in John's time used the Septuagint Greek translation of what we call the Old Testament. The Septuagint was the first full translation into Greek of the Hebrew scriptures, which was produced in Alexandria, in Egypt, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, and was widely read in the ancient world.

ἐνεφύσησεν is used in the Septuagint translation of Genesis 2:7 when God breathes the breath of life into Adam. John was intentional with his writing, as he presented Jesus as doing something for the disciples that only God can do. Just as God breathed life into the first human, the risen Jesus breathed new life into the fearful community of his followers. Our passage from John's gospel describes a new creation.

Scripture teaches us that resurrection is not simply an event that affected Jesus alone. His resurrection inaugurated a renewed humanity. The Church is born from divine breath. As he breathed on his disciples, Jesus said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Do note that this mention of the Holy Spirit is not linked, not yet, to outward signs of spiritual power, but to reconciliation and forgiveness, as Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." The first function of the Spirit, according to John, is not spectacle, but restoration of communion. The Spirit forms a reconciling community, and this leads us to the Acts passage which begins, "When the day of Pentecost had come."

Pentecost was already a Jewish festival before it became a Christian one. It was originally an agricultural feast connected to the wheat harvest, and later, it came to be associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. This context is relevant because it was at Sinai that God formed Israel as a covenant people. And at Pentecost, God formed the Church through the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. This was not accidental timing. Luke

presents Pentecost as both renewal and massive expansion of God's covenant with his people.

And Luke uses quite a bit of biblical imagery. The Acts passage says that there was “a sound like a rush of a violent wind.” The text says **like** a wind, not necessarily a literal wind, but phenomena interpreted through biblical imagery as wind, breath and spirit are deeply linked in biblical thought. In Hebrew, *ruach* can mean wind, breath or spirit, and the imagery is of life-giving and creative power.

And then “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them.” The little words “**as of**” indicate analogy. Luke was describing the indescribable through more biblical symbols. Fire in Scripture often signifies divine presence, such as the burning bush and the pillar of fire in Exodus. But on Pentecost, the fire did not remain distant. At Sinai, the presence of God was on the mountain, while at Pentecost, fire rested on people, indicating that the locus of divine presence had shifted – from sacred spaces to a people made holy.

God's dwelling place was no longer centred in sacred geography but in a Spirit-filled people. I think back to Jesus conversing with the Samaritan woman by the well. She was telling him how her people, the Samaritans, worshipped God on Mount Gerizim but the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. And Jesus told her that the locale for true worship will be in spirit and in truth.

The fire rested on “each of them”, on each one of Jesus’ followers who had gathered in one place. This detail demonstrates that the Spirit is not monopolized by a single mediator like Moses. The gift is distributed and the whole community became Spirit-bearers.

And then they began speaking in other languages. Too often this passage is reduced to a miracle of speech, but Luke emphasizes hearing, that each person heard the disciples “speaking in the language of each.” The miracle was communicative intelligibility – the capacity to **understand** one another.

This miracle is often interpreted as a reversal of the Tower of Babel, because at Babel, human pride resulted in fractured speech and dispersed people. At Pentecost, divine initiative created understanding across linguistic and cultural differences. The languages remained distinct. It was not a matter of uniformity, but intelligibility in diversity. The Holy Spirit does not erase difference but enables communion across and between them. What a wonderful gift we have!

The crowd described by Luke represented the known world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya that belonged to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome. Luke’s geography is theological. He was describing the nations being gathered. He anticipates the Church’s universal mission.

In quoting from the prophecy of Joel, Peter provided the interpretation of the event. For him, and for Luke who recorded this event, the last days had begun, not as a catastrophe but as divine **outpouring**. The Holy Spirit marked the beginning of the age of fulfilment, which is radically wide in its scope as it includes sons and daughters, young and old, slaves and free. The Holy Spirit destabilizes rigid hierarchies. Access to God is no longer mediated through restricted categories of status. The Spirit is poured out on **all** flesh.

So, let's see how our two passages together teach us about Pentecost. John describes the risen Christ filling, breathing divine life, into fearful disciples and forming a reconciling community. Pentecost is a new creation. Acts tells us Pentecost is a public empowerment. The Holy Spirit gives the Church the energy for multilingual, boundary-crossing witness.

Pentecost is both inward and outward. The Spirit gives life to the Church and sends the Church into the world. The Spirit reconciles and commissions. The Spirit forms community and creates purpose and mission. That's what we have; that's what we are.

Let me finish with the words that prefaced our gospel reading: "Alleluia, alleluia. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fires of your love." Amen.