

The first day of a new creation: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104; John 16:13; Acts 2:1-21

by [Maureen Dallison Kemeza](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

After Jesus returned to the Father, the disciples withdrew to the upper room. They may have been waiting for the Spirit, but they did not wait in silence. According to the Acts of the Apostles, they prayed up a storm.

In the ancient world, prayer wasn't like it is now in many churches—private and mental or carefully scripted. People prayed aloud. By gathering together in the upper room, these women and men were already transgressing by avoiding rigid separation of the sexes. Perhaps married women lifted their voices along with their husbands'; perhaps some women even let their hair loose in holy abandon, as Christian women of Corinth are on record as doing a little later.

It is likely that the gathered disciples sang psalms of lamentation, thanksgiving, praise and glory. From outside, you might have heard a steady murmur like water over stones in a streambed, with women's and men's voices rising and falling. Some may have wept as they prayed, while some shouted aloud in exaltation or in passionate pleas. Perhaps they swayed or danced.

Surely scripture guided their common prayer, for they were devout Jews. Maybe someone recited the prophet Ezekiel's unforgettable encounter with the Lord, the lectionary reading from the Hebrew Bible for Pentecost Sunday.

The Spirit came upon Ezekiel, who ministered in Israel in the time of captivity in Babylon, and drove him far out of the town to a valley where there were countless dry bones. This was the desolation of Israel defeated and deported from the homeland. This was the carnage of war and witness of the people's suffering in exile. When the Lord asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" the prophet replied, "You are the one who knows." Then the Lord God called out: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live," and announced, "I'm going to open your graves, and put my spirit within you so that you will live, and place you on your own soil" (adapted from Ezek. 37:1-14).

Praying through the story from Ezekiel, the disciples believed that the Lord's Spirit would change history again, and that Jesus had been sent by God to purify and

reform the faith of Israel. As in the days of the prophets, only a faithful return to God would release Israel from its oppressors and restore justice. The prophetic scripture became their prayer: May your Spirit again renew our faith; restore your people, dispersed to the four corners of the earth, to their own soil!

Perhaps invocation of the prophetic tradition prompted someone in the group to name another work of the Spirit known from wisdom tradition: creation. Echoing the cosmic worldview of Genesis 1 and of Job, Psalm 104 invokes the Creator from whom comes the whole blooming, buzzing world. There's no mention here of a singular covenant with one chosen people; no anthropocentric focus. Rather, the divine Spirit is the prolific Creator of every being. "When you send forth your spirit they are created / and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps. 104:30).

Since the law of praying was the law of believing, Psalm 104—as part of the continuous prayer of the people in the upper room—would lead them beyond exceptionalism toward a universal and cosmic faith. The Hebrew scriptures shaped the disciples' anticipation of the character of the Spirit to come.

Acts picks up the story. While the disciples pray, a great wind sweeps through the room, and tongues of fire come to rest on each of them. They know it is the Spirit, for they discover in themselves prophetic power to proclaim the word of the Lord. It feels like the first day of creation. The sweet, powerful Spirit drives them out to their fellow Jews who have come from the four corners of the diaspora for the Passover festival.

You have heard the rest: some who hear them are convinced; others revile them as drunks. Peter stands up to refute the accusation with convincing eloquence. It is not strong drink that animates them, he assures his audience, but the Spirit inaugurating a new day when everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

As we now know, the movement grew in ways that even Peter could not imagine. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth," Jesus affirms in John 16:13. There would be a new creation: the Christian church, the new graft on the ancient stump of Jesse.

So we come to Pentecost Sunday. The pilgrim church is continually born again, where people gather to listen to scripture and to pray with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. It is the birthday of the church. Let down your hair: sing and

celebrate and dance. The creator Spirit has more to bring to life than we have ever dared to ask or imagine. Let us keep the feast!