

Sunday, June 12, 2011: Acts 2:1-21

The Spirit's power is the power to bear witness.

by [Jim Honig](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

I grew up long before the age of YouTube. My Sunday school rooms were in a church basement in western Nebraska. We didn't even have filmstrips! When I think back to the story of the first Pentecost, I remember an illustration on one of those Sunday school leaflets that we kids took home each week. The Pentecost leaflet showed men in robes standing in a room looking out of some windows. I remember thinking it was odd that there was no glass in the windows. All of the men had flames perched on their heads like crowns. I'm not sure I gave a thought to why their hair wasn't burning.

I would have preferred a YouTube video. I would have liked a real-time record of exactly how this inexplicable and indescribable event happened.

But we don't have any of those details. Not only does Luke not provide us with the video, he gives us precious little descriptive detail. Instead he tells us four things: there was the sound of a violent wind, tongues of fire appeared on the disciples, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other tongues.

We're not even sure exactly why the disciples were gathered in the Pentecost room. Luke tells us that they were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (1:14). But what kind of prayers were these? Prayers that they not be found and arrested? Prayers for safety if they were found? Prayers that Jesus would keep his promise by returning soon? No doubt mixed in with the prayers was reflection on the events of the past 50 days and lots of questions about what was coming next.

But Luke is far more interested in the consequences of this strange event than in a description of it. Something powerful, something game-changing, something divine had happened. It was a prayer meeting unlike anything they'd ever experienced. Suddenly things started breaking loose. Things were coming apart. The power of God was being unleashed. The Spirit was being poured out in unprecedented

fashion. The wind was bringing something to life.

The first miracle of Pentecost took place before any of the foreigners heard a word about the gospel. The first Pentecostal miracle was that these timid, terrified, untrained, ordinary men (and women?) were touched by the Spirit and changed. This was new creation.

The second Pentecostal miracle was that the followers of Jesus were able to go into the streets of Jerusalem and proclaim the gospel to pilgrims from around the world in the pilgrims' various languages. The life-giving proclamation of Jesus, the Messiah, was gushing forth like the water that overflows a dam and insists on finding passage. According to Luke, the first Pentecostal gift of the Spirit is this gift of speech. As the Spirit was poured out on the disciples, they began to tell of Jesus. The Spirit set proclamation in motion.

When this text is read, it will most likely be in an assembly of God's people, people of one local tribe who will be gathered on yet another Sunday to hear an ancient story read one more time. Will this gathering also be the setting for a Pentecostal miracle? Will the Spirit once again turn timid, terrified, untrained, ordinary men and women into heralds of the gospel truth? What does it look like to trust the Spirit's ability to foster such proclamation in our prayer meetings? The Spirit's power is the power to bear witness.

I asked an artist in our congregation to reflect on the Acts 2 story of Pentecost and to provide a painting to support the proclamation of the Word on Pentecost Sunday. I gave him no further instructions. He specializes in stylized portraits that are often garish and alarming, with one facial feature distorted or out of scale, so I wasn't sure what to expect. He delivered a 6-by-3-foot canvas that is in many ways conventional, even similar to what I remember from my Sunday school leaflet. Scattered around the canvas are 12 human heads with tongues of flame perched on top of each head, each frozen in the act of speech. What immediately catches the eye, however, is the figure at the center of the painting, who is looking directly out of the canvas at the viewer. His index finger points at the viewer, very much like Uncle Sam in old U.S. Army recruitment posters.

The artist managed to capture the heart of this story. The miracle of Pentecost is re-created in every Sunday assembly. Whatever may have happened to those first disciples has been handed off to us. Although I'm not expecting tongues of fire, I am expecting a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit—in the assembly hearing this

same story again for the first time, and in the accompanying proclamation to the world. Once again, God is bringing something new to life.