

Acts 2:1–21 or
Gen. 11:1–9
Ps. 104:24–34, 35b
Rom. 8:14–17 or
Acts 2:1–21
John 14:8–17
(25–27)

Pentecost People

Goal for the Session *Witnessing the gift of God’s Spirit related in Acts 2, adults will rejoice in the Spirit’s presence and workings today.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Acts 2:1–21

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Margaret P. Aymer

Pentecost gives power to the band of Jesus followers to speak the languages of the world, to tell the gospel in every language. The early church was to bear witness to the ends of the earth in the languages of the people of the world. We also should pay attention to the explanation for the phenomenon given by Peter. In quoting Joel, Peter is announcing the end of this present age and the beginning of the age to come, the age of the reign of God. For Peter—and for Luke, who tells his story—the unusual tongues of fire and abilities of speech are signs that God’s reign is immanent, that God will ultimately redeem God’s people.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Linda E. Thomas

As the eleven worshiped, there was a noise so loud that it could not be ignored. So startled were they that they lost control of themselves—their sensory systems were flooded with adrenaline so that their minds and bodies processed intensely the sound, energy, and feeling of the coming of the Holy Spirit. She had come as Jesus had promised, and it was an experience rather than something cognitive. Rational theological reflection could not adequately explain the knowledge conveyed in this sensory event. All of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. Not one was excluded. No mortal could engineer the vivacity of the coming of the Holy Spirit sent by the awesome God of Jesus Christ.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Michael Jenkins

The image of God in which we were created is the image of the triune God of grace. When we say God the Trinity, we are saying that God is in God’s own being, a “Holy family.” In the image of the God who, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is eternal and living community, differentiated in person, united in love, we are ourselves created for community, and never fully live in God’s image until we live in communion. Communion assumes difference—not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or tribe.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard L. Sheffield

In “[their] own languages” they heard “them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (v. 11); they heard that “the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind.” Wulfert de Greef writes: The God of Israel is now also the God of the nations. . . . [However,] the fact that the nations are also now included among God’s people does not imply that Israel’s importance is in any way diminished. Calvin observes that God’s care for us as Gentiles implies that he has joined us together with the Jews. We have been united with the descendants of Abraham into one body. We are together with Israel, the people of God.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Acts 2:1–21

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults have experiences of drawing strength from outside sources. It may come in remembering someone or something which inspires in that moment. It may come through another whose very presence instills resolve or courage. We may not be able to explain precisely the mechanics of such empowerment, but our life is transformed. Today's passage from Acts narrates the story of the Spirit's gift to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. Some adults in your group may have difficulty separating Pentecost from Pentecostal, and question the importance of this narrative.

*May your Holy Spirit lead me in the preparing and leading of this session.
Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- table
- large red cloth
- seven votive candles in holders
- lighter
- newsprint or board
- markers of various colors
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- Bibles
- map of first-century eastern Mediterranean region
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 12, 2022

For Responding

- option 1: hymnals or songbooks with hymn "Spirit," device to play YouTube video
- option 2: collage materials (magazines, construction paper, markers, scissors, glue sticks)
- option 3: index cards, pens or pencils

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, cover a table with red cloth, set votive candles in their holders on top of the table and place a lighter beside them. In the center of the newsprint or board, write in bold letters "SPIRIT" and set markers nearby.

Welcome participants as they arrive. As adults gather, direct them to the newsprint or board and give these instructions:

- ✪ Use a marker to draw a line out from "SPIRIT";
- ✪ At the end of the line, write a word or phrase you associate with "SPIRIT";
- ✪ You can add multiple lines and word associations.

Gather the group and review these associations with "SPIRIT." Briefly note any connections seen between them.

Relate that today's passage witnesses to the gift of God's Spirit on Pentecost. Encourage participants to be mindful of the associations they made earlier with Spirit as you proceed through this session's exploration of Spirit and Pentecost.

We gather in your Spirit's presence, O God, and pray for your Spirit's leading in this session. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Roots of Pentecost). Read and briefly discuss the background information provided. Encourage participants to keep this context in mind and heart as you explore Acts 2:1–21.

Building on Pentecost's origin in worship, explain that today's reading of the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1–21 will take liturgical form. Ask for seven volunteers to take one of the votive candles and return to their seats. Explain that you will read the passage aloud in seven portions. At the end of each portion, one of the adults with a candle is to return it to the table and light it. As each candle is lit, the whole group responds with a question raised within the text: "What does this mean?"

Carry out the reading as described, dividing the passage as follows: verses 1–4, 5–6, 7–11, 12–13, 14–16, 17–20, and 21.

Invite participants to offer initial comments or questions generated by the reading. Discuss these, including any questions or insights into the text that might linger from the consideration of Resource Sheet 2.

Have adults read verse 1 again. Ask for initial responses to the question: who do you think is meant by "they" in that verse? Consider the implications for whether the answer is traced to a later verse (2:14) or to an earlier description of the Christian community gathered in Jerusalem (1:14–15). How might the inclusion of the latter group as the recipients of God's Spirit on Pentecost affect how we view this passage, and particularly Peter's quoting of Joel in 2:17–18?

The groups listed in verses 9–10 are in an order that roughly moves from east to west, the same direction Acts takes in its account of the gospel's spread by beginning the narrative in Jerusalem and concluding it in Rome.

Display a map of the first-century eastern Mediterranean region, and have adults look at such a map that might be in their Bibles. Locate the areas referenced in 2:9–10. Discuss what this listing might add to our understanding of Pentecost, as well as the presence and purposes of God's Spirit in this narrative. Introduce the sidebar information to bring another dimension into this conversation.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 2:1–21) and read the "What?" excerpt. Discuss its closing emphasis on the reign of God. Invite adults to consider and identify other elements of the story that might be seen as witnesses to God's reign in this narrative. Ask:

- ✧ In that culture, what was the importance—and what were the risks—of asserting the beginning of the age to come?
- ✧ What was the gospel, the good news that all people needed to hear then?
- ✧ What is the good news the whole world needs to hear today?

Reflect on how this session has connected the gift of God's Spirit in Acts 2 with the life of Christian community. Invite silent reflection on the following: as persons and as a community, what joyful witness can we offer to the Spirit's presence and workings in our day?

**EASY
PREP**

If participants are unfamiliar with this song, www.youtube.com/watch?v=raGBCu7Nzgg is a YouTube link that has music, lyrics, and background imagery.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Spirit Song** The church's hymnody provides fresh metaphors for celebrating the Spirit's presence and working in our lives today. Distribute copies of church hymnals/songbooks with lyrics of "Spirit" by James Manley. Invite adults to silently read the lyrics, paying attention to metaphors used for the Spirit's presence and work. Have each adult select one metaphor that carries special meaning for them. Discuss in small groups how these metaphors witness to the Spirit in our lives today. Encourage individuals to regularly return to this metaphor in the coming week as a way of rejoicing in and opening to God's Spirit.
- 2. Envisioning God's Spirit in Our Time** Pentecost invites us to rejoice in and witness to the presence and working of God's Spirit today. Set out collage materials and invite adults to create a collage titled "Envisioning God's Spirit in Our Time." Encourage adults to blend images of the Spirit from Scripture and theology along with contemporary "snapshots" of where they see evidence of the Spirit's presence and working in the church and world. Decide how best to use the banner with the whole congregation for Pentecost.
- 3. Spirit Prayer** Prayer seeks and rejoices in the gift of God's Spirit. Distribute note cards and pens or pencils. Ask adults to compose a brief prayer that seeks or rejoices in the gift of God's Spirit. Encourage adults to frame the prayer in terms that ring true to their experience. Encourage adults to offer this prayer at the beginning and end of each day in the coming week.

CLOSING

Gather adults around or in front of the table with the votive candles. Ask participants to review the board or newsprint from Gathering, where associations with "SPIRIT" were written. Invite them to reflect and then call out their responses to the following:

- ✠ Which of those associations do you see reflected in the Acts 2 story of Pentecost, and how so?
- ✠ Looking back at Acts 2 as well as what has been explored in this session as a whole, what would you want to add to those associations for "SPIRIT" and why?

Have a marker available if persons choose to write these additional associations on the board or newsprint.

Offer the following commissioning or one of your own choosing:

Go now, rejoicing in the presence of God's Spirit, and serving in the power of God's Spirit! Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 12, 2022, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

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The Roots of Pentecost

Ancient Judaism celebrated three pilgrim festivals each year, when Israelite males were expected to journey to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices.

The first such festival is likely the most well-known: Passover. Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem was for a Passover pilgrimage, a detail reflected in several elements of the Holy Week narratives. The last of the festivals is likely the least known in Christian circles: Tabernacles (sometimes called "Booths"). It occurred in early fall, and celebrated the end of the harvest season.

Tucked between these two was a third festival. It was originally called "Weeks" because of its timing of "seven weeks" after the initiation of the spring harvest season (Deuteronomy 16:9–10).

Importantly for today's text from Acts, another text (Leviticus 23:15–16) puts an even more precise date on the observance: "fifty days . . . from the day after the Sabbath." While some disagreement exists over exactly which day is meant by "the day after the Sabbath," the Sabbath in question is clearly associated with Passover. Over time, among Greek-speaking Jews, this festival came to be known by the Greek word meaning "fiftieth": *Pentecost*. On the Christian calendar, this "fiftieth" came to be the fiftieth day of the season of Easter.

Ever since the time of the sixth century B.C. Babylonian exile, Jews had been scattered (*diaspora*) in all directions: to the north, into Asia (a region in modern-day Turkey); to the west, into the eastern Mediterranean region as far as Rome; to the east, into Mesopotamia and Arabia; and to the south, into Egypt. It follows then that pilgrimage festivals like Pentecost would have drawn visitors from a great variety of places to Jerusalem. While Temple services would have been conducted in Hebrew and unified the pilgrims, communication between them in the marketplaces and city streets would have been complicated if not made incomprehensible by all the native languages in common use.

Finally, there are also strong suggestions that by the time of Acts 2, Pentecost had shifted somewhat in emphasis. Originally a purely agricultural festival, Pentecost increasingly celebrated the giving of the law at Sinai and the establishment of covenant between God and Israel. While we do not know if this was established at the time of Acts, later Judaism appointed the book of Ruth to be read on Pentecost. Among the reasons suggested are that Ruth not only is set in the spring harvest season, but Ruth celebrates a Gentile who becomes part of Israel's covenant community.