

# “Tongues of Fire” by Deborah SokoLove

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## Pentecost

It's Pentecost!

So how come you are not all wearing red?

Where are your tongues of fire headbands?

Where are the red balloons?

Why didn't we have a big potluck breakfast before church?

Ok, you are all looking a bit skeptical. Are you wondering, what's the big deal? We've never done anything special for Pentecost here at Seekers.

After all, we're not some Pentecostalist church, being slain

in the spirit and speaking in tongues.

We're not Roman Catholic or even high church Episcopalians. So why should we make a big deal out of Pentecost?

[slide: Duccio, Pentecost, ca 1311,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duccio\\_di\\_Buoninsegna\\_-\\_Pentecost\\_-\\_WGA06739.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duccio_di_Buoninsegna_-_Pentecost_-_WGA06739.jpg)]

In order to answer that, I have to back up a little bit. What are the big holidays of the Christian year? Christmas and Easter, right? Well, yes, but there is more to the story than that.

Have you ever wondered why we use the same liturgy for seven weeks after Easter Sunday? Isn't Easter just that one, special, blowout day when we shout "Christ is Risen," pretend that the Easter bunny has hidden chocolate eggs, and have a big meal with our friends and relatives? Isn't Easter over when we put away the baskets and cellophane grass? So why did we keep starting and ending our services with "Christ is Risen, indeed, alleluia!" for six more Sundays?

The answer is that, for those who, like us, follow the liturgical calendar, Easter is not a single day, but an entire season. Scholars and theologians call it The Great Fifty Days, a period of seven weeks of celebration that begins on the eve of Easter morning and continues until today. Today, Pentecost, is not the beginning of new season, but rather the end of Easter.

This fifty-day period has its roots in a Jewish tradition that begins with Passover, or Pesach, and, lasts fifty days, ending with Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. In the time of Jesus, Shavuot was a pilgrimage festival, noting the end of the barley harvest, a time when every family was supposed to bring an offering to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is not a coincidence that our Jewish neighbors are celebrating

Shavuot—the end of counting seven weeks—just as we are celebrating Pentecost, the Fiftieth Day, because the words mean roughly the same thing.

Today, at Shavuot, Jews remember and give thanks for the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, marking the covenant relationship between God and the Jewish people. Today, we Christians remember and give thanks for coming of the Advocate in a visible, audible way. Some people call it the “birthday of the Church,” the day when the followers of Jesus were given renewed strength and courage, finding their voice as the risen and gathered Body of Christ.

[slide: *Mary with the Apostles at Pentecost*, Santiago de Chile, Santuario Bellavista Schönstatt, Holy Spirit Church.  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/431641945516387402/?lp=true>]

Every year on this day, we hear the same reading from Acts 2, which begins, “When the day of Pentecost at come, the disciples were all together in one place.” Like the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth that we read on Christmas Eve, and the story of his death and resurrection that we heard seven weeks ago, some of us feel that we could recite it from memory. So, how does it go?

- A violent rush of wind.
- Divided tongues of something like fire, coming to rest on each person’s head.
- Each one was filled with the Holy Spirit and began talking. Although the crowd that gathered around them came from every part of the world, each one could hear them speaking in their own language.
- Some said they were drunk, but Peter said that was impossible because it was only nine in the morning.
- This, he said, was the ancient prophesy coming true. God’s spirit is being poured out, and everyone –young and old, male and female, masters and servants–everyone will see visions and have dreams of a new day in which

all who believe the promises of God will be saved.

Ok, I've conflated the readings a bit there at the end, but I think that's the point. We read Ezekiel, Acts, Romans, and John all together on this day because the Word of God cannot be contained in a single narrative, a single point of view, a single doctrinal statement that lays everything out clearly and without ambiguity. The Word of God is much bigger, and more confusing, than mere words can explain.

[slide: Edward Burra *Dancing Skeletons* 1934, Tate Museum  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/burra-dancing-skeletons-n05005>]

We need to hear the prophet Ezekiel's promise of ongoing peoplehood: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Holy One, have spoken and will act," however much it is being misused at this moment when the Israeli government uses its military power to oppress Palestinians who make the same legitimate claims to a homeland that the Jews made in establishing their state 70 years ago.

[slide: Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916), *Christ with Red Thorns*, 1897. Charcoal on paper, 50 × 40 cm. Private collection.

<https://artandtheology.org/2016/03/22/christ-crowned-with-thorns-interpreted-by-symbolist-artist-odilon-redon/>]

We need to be reminded of the prophet Joel's terrifying vision that God "will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Holy One's great and glorious day," however much we want to think of erupting volcanos as merely the mechanical workings of geological forces rather than take them as warnings about misusing the earth.

[slide: "Charis-Kairos (The Tears of Christ)." Taken from "The

Four Holy Gospels," illuminated by Makoto Fujimura, © 2011.

<https://www.faithandleadership.com/theology-and-arts/>

We need to hear Paul's reminder in Romans that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words," however much we want to be strong and capable and smart and know exactly what is good for us and for everybody else, too.

[slide: Meinrad Craighead, *Mechtilde of Helfta, 1240-1298, Germany*, 2010 <http://www.meinradcraighead.com/themystics.html>]

We need to hear Jesus's promise that "when the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth; for she will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever she hears, and will declare to you the things that are to come," however much we think we can depend on computer models and past performance to tell us the future.

We need all of these strange images that we've been looking at and hearing, these conflicting warnings and promises, these reminders that there is a mystery at the heart of existence that is bigger than any of us and that speaks to each of us differently. We need to remember that we are weak, finite beings whose fate is intertwined with all that is seen and unseen.

It is easy to lose heart, to despair at all that is wrong in the world. The Pentecost readings remind us that things looked pretty bleak in Jerusalem, too, a mere 50 days after Jesus was crucified. As Paul puts it,

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not*

*see, we wait for it with patience.*

[slide: *The Holy Pentecost Icon*, Resurrection Catholic Parish,  
Tualatin, OR

<http://rcparish.org/about-rcp/icons/pentecost-icon/>

In the end, we make a big deal out of Pentecost because, in a very real sense, it changed everything for the people who were there, and thus for us. Jesus had died on the cross, and the disciples were hiding out, terrified that the authorities would be after them, too. They had had a few sightings of the Risen Christ, but they still didn't know what to make of it. Suddenly, they were all gathered together and something happened that turned their despair into hope. They couldn't explain it. They only knew that it was real.

[slide: Roman Barabakh (Ukrainian, 1990–), *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, 2017. Cyanotype print, 54 × 42.2 cm.

<https://artandtheology.org/tag/roman-barabakh/>

Recently, I had an experience that changed everything for me. Here is what I wrote in my spiritual report a few days later:

I confess that I have never understood what it means to love God. For me, God has always been too abstract, too diffuse, too impersonal to be lovable. In many ways, this was the reason that I became a Christian—I could, if not quite love, then at least admire and relate to Jesus as the human face of God. Like the disciples, through Jesus I felt that I could approach God in some way that was impossible for me when I tried to be a faithful Jew.

*On Monday evening, something happened that changed all that. I was in a meeting, listening to a story written by someone who had found not just abstinence but genuine freedom in her life by following the 12 Steps. At some point in the story, she wrote, "I love my Higher Power." I've probably heard something like that hundreds, if not thousands, of times.*

*This time was different. Suddenly, I was overcome with a feeling of intense love, joy, and gratitude for God. Somehow, God was present to me in an immediate, physical way that I have never experienced before. Later, as I was trying to describe what had happened, it seemed somehow similar to that Thomas Merton passage where he talks about coming up out the subway to see everyone around him shining like the sun. In my case, however, it was not my experience of other people that had changed, but rather my relationship with God. While I am still unable to describe God as anything other than abstract and diffuse, both entirely other and intensely intimate, suddenly I understand what it means to say that God is personal, approachable, and lovable. I am, for the first time in all my 71 years, in love with God.*

*Today, although the feeling has faded, a smile still comes to my lips when I remember that moment of clarity. Nothing has changed in my life – I still struggle to get up in the morning and get to work, I still get frustrated over little things, I still cannot seem to write more than a few hundred words at a time of the thousands that need to be written in order to complete my book. However, just remembering that feeling of intense love does bring back a shadow of itself, enough to keep me going even when my time seems to be eaten up with the demands and needs of others. My heart is filled with gratitude for this new spiritual gift, what Teresa of Avila calls a “consolation” after a long period of spiritual dryness.*

[slide: Jan Richardson, *What the Fire Gives*,  
<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2015/05/17/pentecost-what-the-fire-gives/>

In this spirit of love and gratitude, I will close with the verses from Psalm 104 which are appointed for this Pentecost day. It is a love song to God.

*God, how fertile your genius!  
You shape each thing,  
you fill the world  
with what you do.*

*I watch the sea, wide and deep,  
filled with fish, large and small,  
with ships that ply their trade,  
and your own toy, Leviathan.*

*All look to you for food when they hunger;  
you provide it and they feed.  
You open your hand, they feast;  
you turn away, they fear.*

*You steal their breath,  
they drop back into dust.  
Breathe into them, they rise;  
the face of the earth comes alive!*

*Let God's glory endure  
and the Holy One delight in creating.  
One look from God, earth quivers;  
one touch and mountains erupt.*

*Let us sing to our God,  
make music for the Holy One  
as long as we live.  
Let our song give joy to God  
who is a joy to us. [\[1\]](#)*

Amen.

[\[1\]](#) Slightly adapted from International Committee on English in the Liturgy, *Psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer*, Liturgy Training Publications, 1995, pp 243-244