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Afraid... An uncertain future... Staying off the streets... Avoiding contact with others... Longing for life to return to normal... Wondering when God would make the world safe again...

Sound familiar? That may sound like a description of us today, but actually, I was describing how the followers of Jesus may have been feeling 2000 years ago after Jesus had died, and even though they knew he was alive, they still lived with uncertainty. In the midst of our pandemic, we share many of the same characteristics with them: uncertainty, fear, disruption of routines.

The book of Acts describes how those early followers of Jesus had something we do not have: being together in one place. Many people had gathered in the city for the annual Jewish Pentecost festival, which celebrated the first fruits of harvest, those crops that were ready to eat in the spring.

Those of you who plant gardens know the joy of getting the first items to eat: lettuce for a salad, rhubarb for a pie, or tasty asparagus. It's so exciting to harvest some food and prepare it for a

delicious meal, and if you have an abundance of items in your garden, you know the joy of sharing your harvest with friends.

The annual Pentecost festival was like a giant party to share the first foods harvested from the fields. The party also celebrated God's gift of the Torah, the holy teachings from God, written in the opening books of the Bible.

In a sense, Pentecost celebrated God feeding us with food and feeding us with words of wisdom, but while the crowds gathered in the streets to celebrate, the followers of Jesus were hidden away, together in one place. Being a follower of Jesus was not the safest choice in that day, for Jesus was considered a rebel, and his followers were hunted down.

In the midst of their fear and uncertainty, something mysterious occurred: those Jesus-followers saw what appeared to be flames of fire moving among them, and they heard something like a mighty wind fill the house. The Greek word the New Testament writer used for *wind* can also mean

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“breath,” as in the breath or Spirit of God. The word translated as “filled” can mean “filled to the brim” or “supplied” or “to complete.”

In other words, God’s Spirit provided them with everything they needed, even though they were hiding in a room cut off from the rest of the celebration. As the Spirit filled them, they went out in the streets and began to tell about their experience of Jesus, and even though people from many nations were speaking different languages, amazingly they could all understand the followers of Jesus. Many trusted in what they heard and became followers of Jesus, which is why we Christians see Pentecost as the birthday of the church.

What began as a Pentecost celebration of the spring harvest took on a new meaning as the seeds of Jesus’ life grew into a church. From that gathering in one place came a gathering all over the world, a celebration that has echoed throughout history for the past 2000 years.

In the tenth century, the church in Rome dramatized the coming of the spirit with “Holy Spirit holes” in the ceilings of churches. Author Diana Eck suggested that these holes illustrated the “openness of the church to God and the fabulous fact that the Spirit cannot be contained within the church. On Pentecost, doves were let loose through these holes to fly about in the church, bundles of rose petals were released to fall down upon the people like the tongues of fire, and the choirboys were set to whooshing and drumming to call to mind the rush of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Some churches throughout the centuries have recreated this release of birds into their sanctuaries on Pentecost, as was the case with one person who described their church’s experience:

[Our pastor] got the idea of having a pigeon released from the belfry on Pentecost just at the moment when, on the church steps in front of the procession of worshipers, he would say, “Come, Holy Spirit!” Pentecost came, and the [deacon] put a pigeon in a bag, went upstairs to the belfry and waited. When the [pastor] pronounced the words, nothing happened. A

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few seconds later, we heard a voice from the belfry, "It [suffocated]!"<sup>2</sup>

This year we may feel as though our Pentecost has been suffocated, stifled, for whereas the followers of Jesus had been gathered together in one place, we can't even do that during this pandemic. We long to be back together again, and some churches have opened their sanctuaries, but guidelines suggest that those 65 and older should remain home, which is a large portion of our two congregations. As the news reminds us that more COVID-19 cases still occur, we may feel like the disciples before that Pentecost day waiting and wondering what might happen next.

Being gathered together in one place just isn't the same as it used to be, but that doesn't mean we're cut off from one another. Several people gather three days a week on computers and phones for prayer, Bible study, and conversation. Our young adults meet online each week for conversation, and

even Family Game Night occurs in a virtual online place. Gathering here in this virtual worship space, whether by computer, smartphone, or through a recorded service on DVD may not feel the same as gathering together in one place in our sanctuaries. But through God's Spirit, we are bound together, interconnected by a bond of hope, knowing that God still moves among us.

We don't need a release of doves, dancing flames of fire, flower petals dropped from a hole in the ceiling, or the ability to speak in many languages to know that God is among us. The Spirit of God moves through the sparks of electricity that send these video and audio signals into your homes. For now, these technologies are *our* Holy Spirit holes, reminding us that God's Spirit moves among us.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God*, 130.

<sup>2</sup> <https://javacasa.com/humor/seasonal.htm>