

St James United Church



Message for May 24, 2026 Pentecost Sunday

“Led Out of Fear” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft
Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23; Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Pentecost”

As I’ve shared before, I love this day, love the energy of the Acts reading with tongues of flame and rushing wind, the promise of inclusive love that the Spirit’s wind and fire make possible as the disciples were empowered to share about Jesus and the people could understand them. I hope you experienced some of that promise as the Pentecost narrative was read in English, Isoko, Spanish and German.

But as much as I love the energy, this year I want to consider this day more calmly. I’m drawn to the tone of John 20, I guess, the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples and gifting them the Spirit with his breath. It’s a gentler gifting than through wind and fire, and one that gives time to take hold. That shows compassion, so needed because before that moment the disciples were locked away in fear. Fear is similar to grief, which we reflected on last week. Both tend to fix us in place. Thankfully in the Acts reading the Spirit unfroze the disciples, sending them into the street to bring diverse people together as Jesus had done. We’re here now because they did.

But while the Acts reading speaks about the Spirit’s animation, I think more often they were how it is portrayed in John’s gospel, a bit tentative, unsure. Steve Garnaas-Holmes captures this in a recent poem as he writes:

“Probably not eloquently. More likely
in halting Phrygian, mangled Mesopotamian.
It probably took some back-and-forth, some double-checking,
requiring not just proclaiming but listening,
relating, getting feedback,
patience on the part of the hearers,
and courage and humility on the part of the speakers—
willingness to risk, to be beginners, to appear foolish,
to forgo the safety of being in the dominant group,
overcoming barriers.
None was a solo. They were all ensemble pieces.”

I like that poem. It captures the tentativeness that you read in the next chapters in Acts. The first Christians weren't always sure of themselves, but the Spirit guided them, sometimes in sight-taking epiphanies like for Paul that forced him to see Jesus' teaching differently, or the vision given to Peter when God challenged his assumption that some things are unclean, but most often the Spirit nudged them gently, inviting them to build on what they already knew. The aim is the same, for the circle of God's love to be widened, the Spirit gifting them with humility to know that God's vision is bigger than theirs and courage to follow it despite fear of making a mistake.

In this the Spirit helped them to draw from their roots in order to grow. I think this is why the author of Acts described the Spirit coming in wind and fire. Pentecost is the day in the Jewish calendar when they mark God revealing Torah. God descended to Mount Sinai in fire, wind and cloud. God descended again in fire and wind but lifted a metaphoric cloud, enabled the people to understand each other. Up to that point, they thought their relationship with God was just about them. But God expanded the circle. The core teaching was that God wants to be in relationship. That didn't change. But God wanted them to broaden who was to be included in that relationship.

And that has been our history for two thousand years. We freeze occasionally into set patterns, but then the Spirit invites us as Jesus' disciples to once again broaden the circle and apply his teaching in new ways. That's what we did in 1958, establishing a congregation beyond the circle of the downtown churches. As we look ahead, I wonder if there are points of our founding mission that the Spirit is nudging us to apply in new ways. We were formed to be of service to our neighbours. Who they are may have changed but that mission remains. All those years ago the neighborhood was filled with folks who were new to town and St. James was a safe harbour. How might we be that safe harbour in new ways? Many early members went to MUN. How might we strengthen our ties to students and staff? Those are some of my observations. I'm sure you have additional things we can do as we look to our future, not changing who we are so much as applying our heritage in ways that fit our current context.

I realize that considering the road ahead can be scary but like in the early church, God can work with our fear. As we said in the creed, we're not alone, God is with us. The Spirit is ever animating us, inviting us to draw on our spiritual gifts, as individuals, of course, but more often calling us to use our gifts to build up the community. And not just us, but God is present in ever widening circles, seeking to bring more and more people into relationship. So let's pray for patience in our discerning, humility in our sharing, openness to follow the Spirit's lead, all with courage and trust in God's grace. Amen.