

DATE: May 24, 2026

TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

THEME: Filled with the Holy Spirit, we are being empowered by love to take risks.

SUBJECT: Pentecost, Taking Risks

TITLE: The Miracle of Pentecost

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Do we still experience the miracle of Pentecost?

Children: Ask: What do you need to live? [list] Have you ever heard about the Holy Spirit? Describe Her. Sometimes people call her Wisdom. Can you tell me what wisdom looks like? (No, but they can probably tell me what wisdom is like.) Take out a fan. Put various objects in front of it and watch them blow away. Ask students what's blowing these objects. What does it look like? Can't see it? How do you know it's there? Now take a deep breath. Do you see the air go in or out? How do you know it's there? Holy Spirit is the same way. We can't see Spirit, but we wouldn't be alive without Him. She has many names: Wisdom, Truth, Love. We can't "see" any of these, but we couldn't survive without them.

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

As you know, I was a teacher for many years, sandwiched between pastoring churches in the late 90s and early 2000s and then returning to pastoring a few years ago. Part of being a teacher involves communicating with parents. I could communicate with most of them, but many of them spoke only Spanish. It was difficult to connect with them because I didn't speak Spanish very well. In my 20s, I had taken a few conversational Spanish classes when I lived in San Antonio, but I decided to get more serious in my 50s. I went to a language school in Mexico one summer, used DuoLingo religiously, and read things in Spanish. I can't say that I've reached fluency. Comprehension has been the biggest challenge, but I got to a point where I could call up Spanish-speaking parents and connect with them. Then, at a Back-to-School Night event, my principal asked me to facilitate a meeting with Spanish-speaking families to go over school policies and procedures and answer questions. The idea terrified me,

but he had confidence in me. I ended up writing out much of what I wanted to say and then muddled my way through the Q & A time. Afterward, one father came up to me and spoke to me in easily understandable English. He knew I was struggling with Spanish and so he said, “Thank you for speaking in Spanish. When teachers take time to learn our language and try to speak to us in it, it goes deep.”

How many of you have attempted to learn or have succeeded in learning another language as an adult? How many grew up multilingual? I say “as an adult” because, while I think it’s possible to learn a language at any age, the barriers can get greater as we grow older. Our brains don’t quite absorb things like they used to; we get busy and, unless we immerse ourselves in another culture, language learning is sporadic as we try to find time to use another language besides the one we need to use every day. Then there’s the embarrassment factor. Most adults have less tolerance than children to say things wrong and risk being embarrassed or of offending someone else. Anyone who has learned another language as an adult has experienced both embarrassment and concern about offending someone, but risk is necessarily part of the process of learning a language and also about learning another culture.

50 days ago, we celebrated Jesus’ defeat of death on Easter. Today we’re celebrating what is popularly known as the birthday of the Church and the scripture we read comes from *The Message* (Eugene Peterson, 1993). It sacrifices accuracy in translation so as to bring the text alive to today’s audience. I chose it so that we could hear this well-known passage in a different way. Here’s what I’m most familiar with: “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” *The Message* says, “Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their

ranks.” For 50 days, after hiding behind closed doors and barely venturing into streets for fear of their lives, followers of Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit spreading through their ranks and calling them to take the risk of coming out of hiding. If they were hesitant to take that risk, the Spirit was in no mood for a timid response! If you’ve ever seen fire spread throughout a house or a forest, you have an image of the way Eugene Peterson himself was picturing the rapid expansion of God’s Spirit through the crowd. Later on in the chapter, in fact, we’re told: “Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). Now that’s wildfire!

But I also like the NIV and NRSV translations: “...tongues of fire separated and came to rest (ἐκάθισεν) on each of them.” Now, I try not to lean too heavily into interpreting the meaning of a Greek word in one context based on how it’s used in other contexts, but I find it interesting that ἐκάθισεν can also mean “sat”, as in: Jesus sat on a colt as he rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week (Mark 11:7); or that Christ sat down at the right hand of Majesty in heaven (Heb. 1:3, 8:1 and 10:12). In some Biblical contexts, it seems ἐκάθισεν can carry a sense of (near) completion and of inevitability. If that’s accurate, we might say that there was no preventing the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit of Love, from sitting (or resting) on hundreds - even thousands - of new believers on that first Pentecost and upon billions to come. If the story of Pentecost helps us to remember anything, it is that no Roman legion, no temple guard, no earthly power however great - not even death - can hold back the inevitable: God’s fiery passion and unconditional love resting upon humanity and all of creation. Political

parties and executive orders come and go, but God's executive order remains: love one another; as I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34).

Was the event at Pentecost a miracle? If it was, what was the miracle? Was it miraculous that flames appeared and sat on all those who were sitting in the house? Was it miraculous that people could suddenly speak in different languages, perhaps ones they'd never used before? God is certainly able to make these things happen, but I think these were not the greatest signs and wonders that day. I think the miracle that day - and in every day that has followed since then - was the willingness of believers and soon-to-be believers to take risks they once couldn't imagine taking. What risks?

After this event, remaining behind closed doors was no longer an option. The book of Acts goes on to talk about the fellowship of believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and adding to their number daily, about Peter speaking boldly before the Sanhedrin, about the apostles' many many healings ... and about the apostles' persecution. To the best of our knowledge, all of the original disciples except John were executed for defying the edicts and orders that prohibited the spreading of the gospel; but amazingly, this just fanned the flame. You know human nature as well as I do. Tell someone not to do something, and they'll go ahead and do it all the more - often just to spite the one ordering them around. We call that person "spirited". And so they are, even to the point of dying for what they believe in. The 12 certainly weren't the only ones to suffer that fate. State governments don't like to hear words like, "We must obey God rather than people" (Acts 5:29). They like it even less when actions follow words, but that kind of boldness - that willingness to risk - was the miracle that Pentecost instilled in the original believers. And in us today still.

I'm thinking about Peter who said those words. Once he cowered behind closed doors, but in Acts 2 and afterward we see an entirely different Peter, one who is flogged for speaking in the name of Jesus and is then told directly not to do it again. So what does he do? Immediately after the flogging in the temple courts, scripture says, "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, [he] never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

I'm thinking about Stephen ("a man full of God's grace and power") who did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people (Acts 6:8). His words and actions threatened certain people and he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish ruling council. False accusations were brought against him to silence him as he stood before the judges, but he spoke all the more boldly, ending with these words: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:51-53). To say Stephen took a risk is a vast understatement. He didn't last long after that.

I'm thinking about Mariann Budde, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (DC). At the inaugural prayer service at the Washington Cathedral in January 2025, she implored President Trump to "have mercy" on vulnerable populations, specifically LGBTQ+ children and undocumented immigrants. Later, the president demanded an apology and criticized the bishop as a "radical left hard-line Trump hater" whose remarks were "ungracious" and "nasty in tone." Bishop Budde has

also faced backlash from conservative religious leaders. Good thing you can't get killed for speaking truth to power in this country, eh? And yet, Bishop Budde has received severe online harassment and death threats. It's difficult for me to imagine the kind of mental and spiritual preparation it took for her to deliver that message directly to one of the most powerful people on earth. I do know that it would have been impossible without the miracle of the Holy Spirit speaking through her to take a risk and be a witness to God's love.

In her book, How We Learn to Be Brave (2023), Bishop Budde writes, "We all want to be brave when it counts—to be the one who steps up, leans in, and does the right thing when it matters most. We want to bring our best selves when we're called upon, to speak with clarity and conviction in a pivotal situation." Have you ever been in a pivotal situation where you had the ability to set the tone? What were the risks? What were the consequences? If you decided to speak or take action, why did you do it? My guess is that your speaking and acting weren't isolated incidents, but that you had been practicing all along. As the Bishop said in her book: "Decisive moments are almost always preceded by seasons of preparation." What you do now is both living AND practicing. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we are—even now—living into the miracle of Pentecost to take risks we once couldn't imagine ourselves taking AND to live according to what our decisive moments set in motion.

I hope and pray that you will realize that you have all the raw material you need to live with courage and purpose in your decisive moments — and in all moments of your life.

Still, death reminds us of The death of the body seems so final. For many years, I used to call my mom every week and we'd talk for an hour or two about everything. Every week we'd solve the problem of world peace, contemplate the existence of God and come up with a Unified Field Theory. Those conversations ended in July of 2020 when the cancer that attacked my mom's body finally won the battle. I cherish those conversations, but I miss talking with her. I still love her, of course, and I believe that God is the source of that love; and so I also believe that we remain connected because love remains. It's like a wildfire that burns through the thin veil that separates the life we now live and Life beyond our comprehension.

Then there's the death of a relationship. A friend moves away, a committed relationship ends, conflict tears down trust and two friends decide to part ways. The fire that once burned brightly dims to a faint glow and may even go out, perhaps never to be re-kindled. Such death may linger on in feelings of resentment or guilt. I've felt both and, in such circumstances, I've wished that God could somehow take away feelings I'd rather not deal with. I've also prayed that God would bless the person whom I struggle to love and that God would transform me. This isn't wildfire love. This is more like tealight candle love, but the Holy Spirit works both ways and in many other ways that we aren't aware of. People of faith nurture trust in a loving God and, in so doing, they also nurture the possibility of love transcending boundaries that once seemed like a dead end. I've found that the more I trust, the more I experience God's love pushing beyond boundaries.

Debie Thomas is a columnist for *The Christian Century*, an author and an essayist for a global weekly web magazine (Journey with Jesus). She says, "As Christians, we place a great stock in language. In words." John's gospel begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:1, 14). Thomas goes on: "We believe that language has power. Words make worlds. And unmake them, too." I would add that words can create or break connections, heal or destroy, include or exclude. Words can cross barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture or politics, but in order to do so involves risk.



When a person dies, we can't call them up anymore to , not the death of the body politic, There are many kinds of death: physical, spiritual, emotional, relational. God created the human body and each one of these will eventually cease to function. I hold onto the Some day I'll have to give up this mortal frame, but I believe there's one thing I'll never have to give up: the death of our physical bodies. If spiritual death can mean dying to hope in God's abiding presence, the people whose ancestors were liberated from slavery, whose ancestors came to put their trust in things other than God, who demanded kings to rule over them, who wondered if God had forgotten them in the silent years and forsaken them in the years of domination by foreign empires — these people knew about spiritual death. If emotional death can mean sinking into despair as the struggles and pain of life become crushing, then the Israelites knew that kind of death too. "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; I am laid in the dust of death" (Psalm 22:14-15). And if relational death can mean feeling isolated and alone — whether on a rural farm or in a crowded apartment building — then Jesus' followers certainly knew what that felt like, particularly in the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost. For the past 1000 years, they saw themselves as a people set apart by God so that it was even considered punishable by God to get too close to anyone outside of their ethnic enclave. In the weeks following Easter, now they even stayed behind closed doors and otherwise out of sight for fear of their lives. Yes, the Israelites knew something of relational death.

So do we. During Lent I decided to put my phone away - and sometimes in another room - whenever I sat down because I found myself getting on my phone whenever I was feeling a little bored or mentally fatigued or when I just didn't feel like relating to people. I'd just throw on YouTube and start streaming, or play Words with Friends or knock out a few DuoLingo lessons. These aren't bad things in and of themselves, but phones can certainly get in the way of relating to others. In a NYT article a few years ago (*Gen Z Has Regrets*, Sept. 17, 2024), a third of people from Gen Z (who are now 14 to 29) regret the invention of Instagram, and the numbers go up from there: Facebook 37%, Snapchat 43%, and TikTok 47%. Social media can be a great way to connect with others, but it can also tempt people to engage in "doom scrolling" — a replacement for connecting with others — and can lead to unhealthy social comparisons because people only tend to share great things that are going on in their lives on their media feeds. Looking at posts of all the great things other people are doing is contributing to a rise in FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), the feeling of unease that causes the compulsion to stay connected in order to avoid being left out of events, trends or conversations. The result is social anxiety and reduced life satisfaction. Now we're right back to feeling isolated and alone.

The Easter resurrection offers us hope that there's a pathway to find life in each death that we experience.