
Revising Memories at Pentecost

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

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Pentecost Sunday usually collides each year with Mother's Day, High School Graduation, or Memorial Day. In our worship services, the moms, graduates, and veterans come prepared for recognition, while the Spirit waits to be remembered. However, this collision of calendars need not lead to conflict. The celebration of Pentecost provides an opportunity to revise our expectations for these recognitions through memories of a Church empowered in the present. Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36 offers one model for how we might do this.

As Luke tells the story in Acts 2, the disciples of Jesus had gathered in Jerusalem fifty days after Passover to celebrate their beginning as Israelites. In their Jewish tradition, Pentecost (which is the Greek name for the Festival of Booths) was associated with the covenant God established with the people of Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-34). There God constituted a people, provided laws for them to thrive, and they worshiped God. During the festival, pilgrims remembered how their ancestors lived in wilderness booths dependent on God's provision. Their celebrations, however, were hampered by their speech. Despite their religious unity, their diverse languages and cultures divided them. In Jerusalem, the pilgrims sounded like people scattered after the Tower of Babel.

In an upstairs room, the Spirit intervened. Tongues of fire appeared over the heads of the disciples, and sounds like a violent wind filled the place. The casual observers thought the disciples were drunk; others heard them speaking the birth-languages that people spoke. Peter, however, interpreted these signs by preaching from memory. He did not transcribe prepared notes to regurgitate in perfectly voiced and measured tones. Luke 21:14-18 indicates that Jesus would give him a “mouth and wisdom” to speak. He would not need to worry beforehand about what to say or how to say it. Peter likely improvised his message by drawing on the collective memories of the day and the place, and Scripture.

To explain the significance of the day, Peter turned to the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16-21). Instead of reminiscing about times gone by, Peter said a new day of the Lord had dawned: sons and daughters could prophesy, men and women could preach, senior adults and young adults could see visions, and anyone who called on Jesus could be saved. A harvest festival designed to remind them of receiving God’s law was transformed into a day to empower them by the Spirit.

Peter changed the significance of the place. Instead of retracing their steps to Sinai, Peter saw the upstairs room and David’s tomb as the intersection of the Spirit’s power. David’s memorial site in Jerusalem was (and still is) a holy site for most Jews, promising them that a Messiah would come from David’s line. Drawing on Psalm 15, Peter said that David’s son had lived and died and risen again, and now was enthroned in heaven. He demonstrated that the risen Christ fulfilled their hopes for a Davidic king (Acts 2:29-35). Thus Peter blessed their memories of the place and filled them with new meaning.

When the people understood Peter, they began to see their moment and place in a new way. So, Peter called for their commitment: to repent their sins, believe now in the Lord Jesus Christ, and be empowered to go forward in the spirit of the risen Christ. Pentecost revised their memories of past events in order to empower them in the present.

The believers received a common gift that reshaped how they gathered together. Their fellow Jerusalemites from all over the world understood each other in their own language. The women, elderly, and young people preached and dreamed in ways that Joel imagined; they called for a commitment now, because the world was coming to an end much more quickly than they had ever anticipated. They saw one another as the witnesses commissioned by Jesus at his ascension (Acts 1:8), who now had the boldness to do what he had instructed them to do. They had found a power in the past that lit a fire in the present.



Preaching still has the power to revise memories of a place and commission people in the Spirit’s power today. And there is no better time to practice this power than during the months of May and June when Pentecost traditionally

falls. Whether we are remembering parents, graduates, or veterans, preachers stand in the space where they can use the memories of the past to empower the Spirit's work in the present.

How can Peter's sermon guide our preaching on Pentecost Sunday? In May and June we are tempted to make two mistakes. One is to surrender to the culture and let Hallmark rule the calendar. So, if it is Mother's Day, we preach a good Mother's Day sermon. The other mistake is to ignore what people are remembering during these days. For instance, we might skip over the school graduates, even though that rite of passage is just as important as anything else going on in their world. By clinging to the liturgical calendar, we miss an opportunity to demonstrate the Spirit's power in their lives

Rather than awkwardly stumble through the cultural 'holy-days,' or arrogantly sneer our way through the liturgical calendar, we might use the people's memories to invite a Pentecostal power in our midst. Mother's Day provides the opportunity to talk about the significance of mothers who have preached and prophesied to congregations over the years. Veterans who have turned their swords into ploughshares can testify to the Spirit's work of making peace. Graduates and families standing at the threshold of a new passage in life can recall the power of the Church to shape their character.

Pentecost is a Sunday to take what the calendar gives us and revise people's memories. Some of those memories are as painful as the Tower of Babel, and others are as powerful as Sinai. Some of those memories can empower new groups of people, like women and senior adults; others simply send the Church to do what we have always been authorized to do. Pentecost gives us the opportunity to go with people to the places they remember – their families, friends, schools, and communities – and incorporate these into worship by showing how the Spirit empowers us to transform those places. If Pentecost Sunday falls on Memorial Day, we might ask a veteran to share a testimony of God's alternative peace in the midst of perpetual war. When commissioning high school graduates, we might share stories of graduates who spent a gap year serving the poor. If it is Father's day, we might ask a family to share a story of serving on mission together.

I have either introduced or revised Pentecost in three congregations. Each one involved a lot of explanation, conversation, and commemoration. Invariably, it collided with someone else's expectations of those days. But instead of ignoring those requests, we can incorporate them. By doing so, I think we seize an opportunity to do what Peter did in Acts 2 – take people's memories and give them a present reality in the Spirit.



It is fascinating how places and memories become so intertwined. For instance, in Jerusalem today the traditional site of the upstairs room is located just around the corner from the traditional location of David's

tomb. You may hear Christian pilgrims singing in a Crusader's church that honors a place where Jesus shared a memorial supper and the disciples returned to receive the gift of the Spirit; and just a few yards away, you may hear faithful Jews praying at the site that commemorates the death of Israel's greatest king.

Of course, I understand that we do not really know where Peter preached and where David is buried. But in his sermon Peter invoked the memory of that tomb; visually and verbally, he blessed what the people were thinking, replaced their memories of David's death, Babel, Sinai, and Booths, and ignited a fire of Pentecost. So, the tourist in me can easily imagine Peter standing nearby and gesturing toward David's tomb as he says, "Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). It is a cool place to take pictures and sing a few songs.

But for the pastor in me, it is a sad place, too—a memorial to the peril of memory. It institutionalizes some of the heartbreaking events between later Christians and Jews, recalling them so powerfully that there is no possibility of a present reality, and small hope for a future that realizes our Pentecost dreams.

And so, to me that place in Jerusalem stands in vivid contrast to another place in Charleston, South Carolina, where memories now linger in a different way. I am thinking of the monument in that city to mark America's first Memorial Day celebration. The Charleston race course had been a Confederate prison where African-American slaves and soldiers died in putrid conditions during the Civil War. Following the liberation of the city, the locals—led by Christian missionaries, teachers, and children—transformed the racetrack-turned-prison-turned-graveyard into a memorial site to honor the dead. On May 1, 1865, they marched to that place, sang, shared a picnic, and planned a new future together in the present. By most accounts, it was one of the first official celebrations of Memorial Day. They took a horrendous event and revised their memories. They could not fix the past or forget about its horrors. They acknowledged the pain, but found new hope in God's promised future to inform their present. It is just the sort of thing the Apostle Peter might do.



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