

May 28, 2023  
The Day of Pentecost, Year A  
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Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37  
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13  
John 20:19-23

For two weeks in February, Asbury University in Kentucky was the center of the evangelical universe. It would have seemed unlikely; Asbury is a private Christian liberal arts university with a total enrollment of less than 2,000. Nonetheless, Christians from across the country traveled there for the impromptu event that has become known as the Asbury Revival.

Here's how *The New York Times* described what happened:

The revival at Asbury began on Feb. 8, when a few dozen students lingered after an ordinary morning chapel service to continue singing and praying together. Word about the spontaneous gathering spread on campus, and by evening, students were dragging mattresses into the chapel to spend the night. Within days, their enthusiasm had exploded into a national event.

The university estimates that the revival has drawn more than 50,000 people to Wilmore, a sleepy town of 6,000 people where the grocery store hosts a weekly Bible study and police cars read "In God We Trust." Asbury was founded in 1890, and its roots are in the Methodist and Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, which has a historical emphasis on transformative movements of the Holy Spirit.

The article described the event as "the nation's first major spiritual revival in decades" and noted that it was driven by Generation Z. About that bit of improbability, it said this:

Generation Z might not seem the likeliest incubator of spiritual revival. Generally defined as those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it is the least religious generation in American memory. Fully one-third of Gen Z identifies as religiously unaffiliated, according to the American Enterprise Institute's American National Family Life Survey, compared to 25 percent of Generation X and 18 percent of baby boomers. But this cohort has also experienced extraordinary stress and loneliness.

Alison Perfater, the Asbury student body president, pointed to the "division and the political unrest of 2020" and the Covid-19 pandemic. "We were due for a breaking point, but instead of it being a horrible breaking point, it was peaceful and sweet," she said.

Many drawn to Asbury in recent weeks describe an extraordinary sense of peace in the room. Attendees of all ages recall bursting into tears upon entering the building.

"It doesn't feel like America in 2023 in here," said Margaret Feinberg, who traveled from Park City, Utah, to attend. "It just melts away."<sup>1</sup>

To repeat, the *Times* article mentioned what it called “transformative movements of the Holy Spirit.” Today is, of course, the Day of Pentecost. *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* offers that Pentecost “emphasizes that the church is understood as the body of Christ which is drawn together and given life by the Holy Spirit. Some understand Pentecost to be the origin and sending out of the church into the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Today we heard two very different versions of the story of how the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The first is from Acts, which is to say it’s from the author of the Gospel of Luke. It takes place on the 50<sup>th</sup> day after the resurrection. It’s a very public event featuring tongues of flame and speaking in tongues and the disciple Peter finding his public voice. The second is from the author of the Gospel of John. It takes place on the day of the resurrection. It’s a very private event featuring Jesus himself and the intimate sharing of breath.

There are many ways that the gospels of Luke and John are very different from one another. It would make sense that these two communities of Christ followers experienced the Holy Spirit in different ways. Even if they did, they agree that on this: the gift of the Holy Spirit enlivened the disciples, providing them with sustenance and guidance for their subsequent life in the world.

Let’s remember that each one of us has also received the gift of the Holy Spirit. For us, too, it enlivens, sustains, and guides. I think that we Episcopalians, the “frozen chosen” as we are sometimes called, are often tentative about claiming that gift. Maybe we’ve seen how the claim on that gift has been abused by others. Maybe we’re hesitant release control and thereby allow room for the random winds that such an uncontrollable force might unleash in our lives. Maybe we’re uncomfortable with the readily visible models of how we might claim that gift.

I can tell you that I was rather shocked when I first learned that there are Episcopal churches with praise bands leading the congregation in singing contemporary Christian music. They’re still out there; I still haven’t actually experienced one. The mere thought of singing hymns with my arms raised makes my stomach lurch. I’m not sure if it’s the gesture itself or what it conjures in my mind, which is the conservative evangelicalism that frightened me when I was a small child, yoked as it was to the racism and misogyny and general air of regression that caused me dismay as far back as I can remember.

Still, I have to wonder if all that is holding me back. What *does* it look like for someone like me to live more in the Spirit? I was pondering this, and it occurred to me that, while I can’t stomach the idea of raising and waving my arms while singing praise music, I’m perfectly okay with executing similar gestures while dancing to popular dance music. I do that regularly, courtesy of streaming Jazzercise classes. Perhaps I just need to put on a different pair of glasses. Or maybe different pair of dance shoes.

Lest you think this is only about your personal and individual relationship with the Holy Spirit, note that Luke and John both describe the Holy Spirit being gifted into the community of disciples. Therefore it’s not too far a stretch to suppose that the Holy Spirit is gifted to *us* as community of disciples. That raises a whole additional set of questions. As a community, how do we notice the presence of the Holy Spirit? As a community, how do we discern and express its guidance?

I have no answers about any of this for you today. I only have questions, for myself, for you as individuals, for us as a community. As we tussle with those questions, it might be worth remembering that we're not as far from that February revival as we sometimes like to think. As the article I started with noted, Asbury University, the site of the February revival, has roots in the Methodist and Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Remember, the Methodist movement began in the Church of England, the parent church of the Episcopal Church, with which we are still in relationship. Methodism was founded by the brothers John Wesley, with help from his brother Charles Wesley, both priests of the Church of England. Charles was noted for writing hymn texts, many thousands of them, including beloved standards such as "Hark! The herald angels sing" and, one of my favorites, "Live divine, all loves excelling."

I'll leave it to you to seek out more information about the Wesleys and Methodism if you're interested, but I'll offer one bit, which I'll use an online source to help explain succinctly; it says this: "[John]Wesley differed from contemporary Anglicans not in doctrine but in emphasis: he claimed to have reinstated the biblical doctrines that human beings may be assured of their salvation and that the power of the Holy Spirit enables them to attain perfect love for God and their fellows in this life."<sup>3</sup> What some call holiness we tend to call sanctification. Either way, maybe it's simply *perfect love*. You can hear echoes of this in the last verse of "Live divine, all loves excelling," which goes like this:

Finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

I can seldom sing that hymn without crying at that verse. I even can't tell you why. But perhaps in this hymn is enough Holy Spirit to help us be more confident in claiming her.

This coming July, the Episcopal Church is hosting its version of a revival, a gathering called "It's All About Love: A Festival for the Jesus Movement." Remember, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry talks about us as "the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus movement." The Jesus Movement page of the Episcopal Church website summarizes it this way: "We're following Jesus into loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, with each other and with the earth."<sup>4</sup> The July gathering was called in part because, due to the pandemic, last summer's General Convention was pared down to necessary business. Here's how the Episcopal Church website describes the gathering:

At last – we’re gathering for a churchwide festival and revival in Baltimore!

Across the church and around the world, we are hungry for revival and renewal. Join us for “It’s All About Love,” a churchwide festival of worship, learning, community, and action for the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, to be held Sunday, July 9 through Wednesday, July 12, at the Baltimore Convention Center. ...

“It’s All About Love” is organized around three Jesus Movement festival “tents”: Evangelism, Racial Reconciliation, and Creation Care. Get ready for evening revival worship and daytime speakers, workshops, panels, and practice opportunities around the big tent themes. Stick with one tent or explore across the tents, following the themes of: worship and liturgy, formation, justice and advocacy, leadership, preaching, stewardship, and youth and children.<sup>5</sup>

I’m not planning to attend, but I’m very glad it’s happening. I’m always on the lookout to see what new things are cooking in our tradition. Dare we call that cooking the movement of the Holy Spirit?

I want to add one thing here before I finish. It’s actually kind of tough being a part of this particular diocese of the Episcopal Church, because we are geographically located where the forces of secularization are moving so very fast. News from the Episcopal Church isn’t quite as glum elsewhere. Sometimes it’s even quite encouraging; it’s quite encouraging sometimes even here. So keep your eyes and your hearts and your minds open. The Holy Spirit is still breathing and blowing.

‘Woodstock’ for Christians: Revival Draws Thousands to Kentucky Town

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Graham, “‘Woodstock’ for Christians: Revival Draws Thousands to Kentucky Town,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/us/kentucky-revival-asbury-university.html> (accessed May 28, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> “Pentecost,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors, available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/pentecost/#:~:text=In%20the%20Christian%20tradition%2C%20Pentecost,the%20church%20into%20the%20world.> (accessed May 28, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Rupert E. Davies, “Methodism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism> (accessed May 28, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> From “The Jesus Movement” page of the Episcopal Church website, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/jesus-movement/> (accessed May 28, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> From the “It’s All About Love: A Festival of the Jesus Movement” page of the Episcopal Church website, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/its-all-about-love/> (accessed May 28, 2023).