

Fire in the dark: Acts 2:1-21

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

Our reformer ancestors would be appalled by some of the small traditions of joy and triumph that have crept into the Christian celebration of Pentecost. We've added trumpet blasts to mimic the great sound of the wind of the spirit, we wave red streamers on bamboo rods, raise clouds of red and white balloons, and even nibble on birthday cakes for the church. We want to signal "Tada!" We made it!

For those of us who've carefully followed the drama of Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension, there is a moment of satisfaction and delight in the arrival of Pentecost. We've made it through the strange and prayerful time following the Pascal feast, in which Jesus who was dead is now known to be alive, and in which we lived in anticipation of the Spirit coming into the lives of believers. Now we live knowing the Spirit's presence. Even if we are not so good at making a spiritual journey of the drama, we can at least act as if we have the Pentecost spirit. Wave those streamers, sound those trumpets!

It does not hurt, of course, that in this part of the world Pentecost comes with spring well under way and summer not far behind. Early lettuce is in, the price for corn in the husk is dropping. Pentecost is often in the lusty month of May, and if not then, in June. Time for a bit of wine, and who knows what else? Celebration is easy!

The liturgically minded are divided: Pentecost is maybe white (Whitsunday), with the sun's lengthened days and the spring-full moons, or maybe red (the color of fire and martyrs), with the fire of sundown and moonrise in the pollen- and dust-laden sky that appears before the green of summer settles in. Red or white, take your choice.

In a good year, when my internal chemistry is chugging along just fine, I love the celebration of Pentecost in all its little excesses. In a not-so-good year, when I haven't shaken the feeling that there are hard times ahead, I think that the congregation and I both deserve better than the innocent triumphal "Tada!"

Peter, however, in one of the more sobering moments in Acts, dispels the notion of a giddy high tide of spiritual excess by quoting the prophet Joel, who proclaims that God will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, yielding prophecy, visions and

dreams—and then proclaims that all this is God’s own word:

I will show wonders in the heaven above,  
and signs on the earth beneath,  
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke:  
the sun shall be turned into darkness  
and the moon into blood,  
before the day of the Lord Comes,  
the great and manifest day.

Peter looks into the heart of the believers’ experience on that day and sees a spiritual harvest that grows from God’s promise in a time of terror, death and death-dealing. What he saw then makes sense now. The Spirit comes when the light is almost gone—the sun darkened and the moon like blood.

On Pentecost “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11b). What are those mighty works? Given the quote that Peter uses from the prophet Joel, those are perhaps known in the utterance of prophecy and in dreams and visions. Perhaps such utterances are not about the death and resurrection of Jesus alone, but about the death and resurrection of hope, for which Jesus is the banner, the icon.

Years ago when my theology had become unfettered by too many Pentecost services in too many liturgically proper churches, I might have identified the red of Pentecost with the red of revolution, with the red flag that appears on the stage in the last act of *Les Misérables*. That of course is too simple, and yet I want to recapture something of that hope as Pentecostal hope. I want the streamers to be at least about what T. S. Eliot called “pentecostal fire in the dark time of the year.”

Perhaps I want it to be my turn to be an old man dreaming dreams. I want this, of course, because I really am getting older. The other options are out. I also want the dreams promised because it is a dark time for the United States of America. How long our “year” will be I do not know, but I believe that unless there is a perceptible, exponential growth in prophesy, dreams and visions, we will die. I dream of a revolutionary Pentecost in America.

Pentecost, however, is not an event to be wished for lightly. The Spirit is somewhat cranky and given to its own thing. “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the

sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8-9).

Hunter S. Thompson Jr. commented on the millennium, which was signaled with the same giddiness as Pentecost in most congregations. "Look around you. There is an eerie sense of Panic in the air, a silent Fear and uncertainty that comes with once reliable faiths and truths and solid Institutions that are no longer safe to believe in . . ."

It is time to take Pentecost back from the celebrants of exuberant but easy triumph. It is time to pay attention to Peter and Joel, to T.S. Eliot, to Thompson. The best Pentecost is a gift of the Spirit that comes when the need is greatest.