

Switching to the New Living Translation on the bible verse we read from Acts 2 just a few minutes ago and backing up a little to reread the Defining (or maybe it's Divining) moment that has become our meaning of

Pentecost: Acts 2:5-21

⁵ There were many religious Jews staying in Jerusalem. They were from every country of the world. ⁶ When they heard this strange sound, they gathered together. They all listened! It was hard for them to believe they were hearing words in their own language. ⁷ They were surprised and wondered about it. They said to each other, "Are not these Galileans who are speaking?" ⁸ How is it that each one of us can hear his own language? ⁹ We are Parthians and Medes, Elamites and from the countries of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and in the countries of Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene. Some have come from the city of Rome. Some are Jews by birth and others have become Jews. ¹¹ Some are also men of the countries of Crete and Arabia. They are speaking of the powerful works of God to all of us in our own language!" ¹² They were all surprised and wondered about this. They said to each other, "What can this mean?" ¹³ But others laughed and made fun, saying, "These men are full of new wine."

Peter Preaches—What Joel Said Would Happen Has Happened

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the eleven missionaries and spoke with a loud voice, "Men of the country of Judea and all of you who are living in Jerusalem, I want you to know what is happening. So listen to what I am going to say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk as you think. It is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ The early preacher Joel said this would happen. ¹⁷ God says, 'In the last days I will send My Spirit on all men. Then your sons and daughters will speak God's Word. Your young men will see what God has given them to see. Your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Yes, on those I own, both men and women, I will send My Spirit in those days. They will speak God's Word. ¹⁹ I will show powerful works in the sky above. There will be things to see in the earth below like blood and fire and clouds of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will turn dark and the moon will turn to blood before the day of the Lord. His coming will be a great and special day. ²¹ It will be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved from the punishment of sin.

So, this is what we consider Pentecost.

I looked at Wikipedia for the Etymology of Pentecost. The term Pentecost itself comes from the Greek Πεντηκοστή (Pentēkostē) meaning "fiftieth". It refers to the Jewish festival of Shavuot celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover. It is also known as the "Feast of Weeks" and the "Feast of 50 days" in rabbinic tradition.

So, trying to say that Pentecost is the birth of Christianity leads to two problems. First, Pentecost is obviously originating from a Jewish festival and secondly and more importantly, didn't Christianity start with the birth of a baby in a manger in Bethlehem?

I am certainly not trying to diminish the true miracle that occurred at Pentecost. When you also realize that Joel had predicted this moment more than 800 years before Christ, with a fair amount of accuracy, you again feel the level of this miracle. A flame that brings the

Word of God to 120 people at the same time. These are people of all backgrounds and languages. Have you ever been to a large International Airport? You are surrounded by people speaking many different languages, it can almost be distracting, especially for those of us that have a hard time picking up other languages, like me. Now imagine being able to all of a sudden have everyone understand the same thing at once, then being able to speak other languages. It is the miracle that they all understood at the same time, not only what was said, but its true meaning and additionally the determination to spread the Word. It was a uniting moment where everyone had the same message and in ways the same assignment. There is also the news that at this moment Peter finds the leadership skills that he was destined to have. He does so without hesitation. All of this through a flame. A flame that God is using to bring people of all races the Word.

What I find intriguing about Pentecost as we Christians know it is that once again God visits in the form of a flame. The bible has 34 different verses where God appears as/communicates as fire. Who can forget Moses and the burning bush? There is Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Psalms all speaking of the pillar of clouds by day and the pillar of fire by night, obviously these verses are related, but it becomes evident that the flame is more than symbolic in the bible. It is a means of communication. A flame is powerful, it can start a huge forest fire that can burn hundreds of miles or it can be the only light in a room for someone. So, it should be no surprise that God uses the flame to get the attention of the people and uses it to communicate with them. Certainly, when you look at where the world was in "industrial" development in biblical times, a flame is one of the most powerful elements. It is not to say that lightning, wind, rain and hail are not mentioned too in the bible, it is more that it becomes evident that the flame is a leading way in which God communicate and gets a point across to us.

Throughout history the flame has been a symbol of power and sometimes more than that. As mentioned above, it has also been the representation of The Holy Spirit connecting with humans. In trying to look at flames as they relate to other things of significance, I researched birthday candles and where the cake, candle and wishes came about. Not surprisingly, there are different claims. Some trace it back to Ancient Greeks where burning a candle was an offering to a god or goddess. More specifically, the round cake was for Artemis the goddess of the moon, round being the shape of the moon and then candles being a special way to honor her. Others trace birthday candles to Swiss culture back in the early 1880's with the middle class and their superstitions. Where the number of candles corresponded with the age of the child and that the candles were to be blown out one by one. Somewhere in there a wish is added to blowing out the candles. My point really being that candles and their flames have held belief and power in ancient and more recent historical times through many cultures.

The flames that visited the disciples brought a different kind of power. The wish that followed these flames was a powerful wish for not only believing, but spreading the Word to the masses. The wishes of the millions came through with a start that day. That day on Pentecost, the Word was heard by many and it spread to those of all backgrounds and languages. Three thousand people were baptized that day. The miracle in the flame on that day of Pentecost goes forth today as The Word is spread to people of all languages in all

countries. The wishes of millions were granted with that flame. They were encouraged to go out and share The Word.

The symbol for the Methodist church is the flame and cross and that history has significance. The actual design was the result of a committee that had been set up with an established principles for the design. This was done two years before the actual union of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The design was to be simple, bold, instantly recognizable, obviously Christian and uniquely Wesleyan. Two Edwards were responsible for the final design. Edward J. Mikula was the art director and Edward H. Maynard was the editorial director. Out of the two dozen concepts, the final choice is what we now know as our symbol/insignia. The resulting insignia is rich in meaning. It relates The United Methodist Church to God through Christ (the cross) and the Holy Spirit (the flame). The designers said the flame is a reminder of Pentecost when witnesses were unified by the power of the Holy Spirit and saw "tongues, as of fire" (Acts 2:3).

So, Pentecost has extra meaning to us as Methodists. We have a reverence to the flame and how it is at times a symbol for the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit many times uses the flame to communicate with us. The Word of God was brought to the people at Pentecost to be shared.

The power of the flame

The power of the Holy Spirit

The power of the Word of God