

"A REMINDER AT PENTECOST" – ACTS 2:1-21 (NRSV)



Day of Pentecost

By: Reverend James Wesley Dennis III

To be Black in America is to be exhaustedly frustrated.

I have stopped and started this sermon too many times to count because to write about hope in the midst of what seems to be hopelessness is mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically exhausting. Where is the hope of the liberating Gospel of Christ among the constant eulogies of innocent, unarmed Black bodies whose names have become hashtags encapsulating the horrific experience of being Black in America?

#AmaudAbrey. #BreonnaTaylor. #GeorgeFloyd.

We are tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of marching. Tired of hoping. Tired of dreaming. Tired of forgiving. Tired of mourning. Tired of being nonviolent. Tired of having to always take the moral high ground. Tired of praying. Tired of vigils and candlelit prayer services. Tired of holding in rage. Tired of petitioning unbothered and unconcerned politicians. Tired of being tired, and exhausted, and being denied the opportunity to live life without fear, violence, and terror. Tired of reminding the world that Black people are human beings, too. We are tired.

And rightfully so. We have been soldiers at battle in America's longest war, *The War Against Racism*. Since the inception of this country, we have struggled to disabuse our white brothers and sisters from the idea that our citizenship and humanity is less valuable than theirs or can be determined by them. And every time an innocent black person is killed at the hands of racial violence and terrorism, we are reminded that "it" is not "over." How we long for the day when we will be able to know the reality of that great prophesy from Isaiah:

[God] shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

But today is not that day. And in the face of being exhaustedly frustrated, somehow, we will have to pick ourselves up and continue to proclaim the justice and righteousness of God in this strange land. Being tired is never an excuse for giving up.

One day during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. suggested to one of his elderly members that she should go back to the buses because she was too old to keep walking. Knowing how important this moment was to her nation, Mother Pollard told Dr. King that she was going to “walk just as long as everybody else walks.” Dr. King replied, “but aren’t your feet tired?” And she said, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.”¹

And that’s our testimony. We are living in-between *tired* and *rested*.

Tired of injustice but *rested* in God’s demand for *justice*.

Tired of violence but *rested* in God’s promise of *peace*.

Tired of poverty but *rested* in God’s faithfulness to *provide*.

Tired of the barriers that divide humanity but *rested* in God’s plans for a new *Beloved Community*.

Tired of feeling powerless but *rested* in the hope that *we shall receive power when the Spirit comes*.

Living in this tension of being tired and rested, being in the already but not yet, has me wondering about the significance of Pentecost for Black people living in America. What does Pentecost mean for Black oppressed bodies surviving in America? What hope can Black people glean from a story about the upper room and tongues clothed in fire?

Sometimes we forget that the story of Pentecost isn’t merely about the “birthday of the Church.” To only focus on it being the birthday of the Church is to washdown the story and disabuse it of having any social significance to oppressed communities. Pentecost is about the birth of a revolutionary alternative community called to be diametrically opposed to the powers and principalities that kill, steal, and destroy. It is a story about the birth of a community that is charged with the responsibility

¹ King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1963). *The Strength to Love*. New York: Harper & Row. pp. 125–127.

of visibly practicing a life-giving faith while living in between the diaspora, those who are focused on surviving, and an empire intoxicated with power and privilege. Essentially, Pentecost is the clash between the powers of this world and the power of God.

It should not be lost on us that the Pentecost story takes place during Roman oppression. The story opens with the disciples hiding, I mean praying in the “Upper Room.” Let me be honest, they were hiding. They had just witnessed their teacher being killed by state-sanctioned police brutality and the same powers that killed Jesus now sought to kill them. But the miracle of Pentecost is the Spirit of God’s interruption of their fear with a new vision for the world and mission for the disciples. “But you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²

The first Pentecost was the empowering of frightful, tired, and frustrated disciples to be witnesses to God’s power throughout the world. And this Pentecost, we should be reminded that God still empowers the frightful, tired, and frustrated by doing three important things.

1. **God Fulfills God’s Promises to Us**

One of the most disappointing things about our observance of Pentecost is that we have somehow disconnected Pentecost from Easter. All over social media, I have seen flyers rushing to get us to Pentecost, but liturgically Pentecost doesn’t make sense unless it is connected to Easter. Luke divides Easter into three units: The Resurrection, The Ascension, and Pentecost. And for Luke, Pentecost is the fulfillment of the Easter Promise. After Jesus has revealed to his disciples his resurrected form in Luke 24, Jesus reminds the disciples that he would be sending upon them what God had promised: *power from on high*.³ Pentecost should always remind us that God is faithful concerning God’s promises. It should remind us that God has not forgotten to send us help and comfort in times of trouble. And though it seems long, frustrating, and exhausting, waiting on God always reveals that God will fulfill God’s promises in unexpected and empowering ways.

² Acts 1:8, The New Revised Standard Version.

³ Luke 24:49, The New Revised Standard Version

2. God Affirms Us

In his commentary on the book of Acts, Dr. Willie Jennings remarked that the “Miracle of Pentecost is less in the hearing and much more in the speaking.”⁴ In other words, it’s important to realize that the Miracle of Pentecost started in the mouths and bodies of an oppressed community within an oppressed community. When the Jews heard these Galileans speaking in foreign languages, they were amazed, but they refused to believe that this was a divine act. The Jews in this story thought that the only explanation for this “episode” was that these Galilean disciples were up to no good. They were drunk. Galileans were conceptualized as uneducated and unruly and surely the Spirit of God could not fall on the uneducated and unruly. The miracle of Pentecost is that God used the bodies of the oppressed to announce that all flesh (bodies) would be worthy of the outpouring of God’s Spirit. Peter stands to make this bold announcement. No matter who you are or what your condition is, all are accepted in God’s new radical vision for the world. All flesh is to be equal and endowed with the power to have visions, dream dreams, and prophesy. All are welcomed to be saved from the powers of this world through the work of the Spirit.

3. God Connects Us

If the work of the Spirit is to *affirm* us, then the performance of the Spirit is to *connect* us. The evidence of the presence of the Spirit is the increase and strengthening of the community. Consider now how before this encounter with the Spirit, there were only 120 disciples gathered in a small room above the city streets. But after the Holy Spirit descends, the small room above the city streets could not contain the presence of the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Spirit blew out into the streets. The 120 disciples could not contain the power of the Spirit in the upper room. The wind of the Spirit was too much for them, but the wind had never purposed to fall on them alone. The Spirit planned to blow beyond the walls of the upper room, to blow down the barriers that divided God’s children and to call them into community.

The power of Pentecost manifests itself in connections. It connects us with people who we would never imagine being connected too. It reminds us that the fight for justice isn’t just a Black issue to

⁴ Jennings, Willie James., *Acts: Theological commentary on the Bible (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)* Louisville, Kentucky. Westminster John Knox Press. 2017. <https://a.co/4rUvLlj>

be fought by Black people; but that it is a people of God issue. Joining us in the fight are White people, Brown people, Indigenous people, poor people, queer people, differently-abled people, all now have an opportunity to be a part of God's community and God's vision for the world.

We are exhaustedly frustrated. But Pentecost reminds us that God has come to us, on us, and with us. And God empowers us by fulfilling God's promises, affirming us, and connecting us to God's witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, in Minneapolis and Brunswick, in Ferguson and Lexington, and to the ends of the earth.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer, Amen.



The Reverend James Wesley Dennis III is the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Darlington, South Carolina. In addition to pastoring, James is the co-founder of the [Common Seminary](#), an online learning community providing seminary-level content, training, and resources to help all people wrestle and answer their theological questions.