

Pentecost is the Church's origin story. Origin stories launch a character and tell us who they are, why they are, and what they are. Origin stories move a character from confusion to clarity.

Peter Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider and learns the hard way that "with great power comes great responsibility." Tony Stark is transformed from an arrogant playboy who makes billions as an arms dealer to a man with a literal new heart that is necessary because his original heart was broken in an attempt to force him to create a weapon of mass destruction. And Steve Rogers' commitment to defending his country against the Nazi's sees him volunteer to receive the experimental serum that makes him more than he's ever dreamed of being; America's super soldier for truth, justice, and the American way – Captain America.

Pentecost is the Church's origin story, and the story itself is brief and even spare in the details: *Acts 2:1–4 (NRSV) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

We have so many questions about this event; we want to know more about the details: what does Luke mean by "a sound like the rush of a violent wind," and "Divided tongues, as of fire?" The debate over the details of Pentecost has been with the Church since our origin; the conversation has been confusing to say the least, but the point of Pentecost is not found in the details; that would be like saying that the point of the Spider Man origin story depends on the type of spider that bit him, but it doesn't matter if it was a Daddy Long Legs or a Black Widow or a Tarantula; what matters is that it was radioactive, and what matters on Pentecost is that the power of heaven was unleashed on earth transforming confusion into clarity so that no matter who we are or where we're from or what we've done, *Acts 2:21 (NRSV) ... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

1. Pentecost: Confusion

*Acts 2:1 (NRSV) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And it was a strange place. The disciples were watching and waiting and praying. They were anticipating that Jesus' promise of power from on high would soon be fulfilled. Meanwhile, the narrow streets of Jerusalem were filled with pilgrims who had come from all over the ancient world to celebrate the gift God gave to Israel through Moses 50 days after the Passover; 50 days (Pentecost) after the Exodus, Israel found herself at the foot of Mt. Sinai. *Exodus 19:18 (NRSV) ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.* God called Moses to ascend up the mountain and God gave Moses the 10 Commandments; God gave Israel through the confusion the way they were to live into God's promise.*

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Both the original Pentecost in Exodus and the Church's Pentecost in Acts occur at strange places. They occur in the midst of chaos and confusion. The people of God are on unfamiliar ground: We're not where we've been, and we're not where we're going. So where are we?

We're confused, and if there is one word to describe where we find ourselves today and where the Western Church finds itself today, it is the word "confusion."

Results from a recent Pew Research project based on census data prompted the following headline from USA Today: "As Protestants decline, those with no religion gain. FEWER THAN HALF IN USA ARE PROTESTANT As Protestants decline, people with no religion, "Nones," are rising in number. Protestants are less than half of Americans, while Nones are one in five."

For a week or so, whatever we read whether in print or online featured some comment on this story. And while the rise of the "Nones" dominated the news cycle, a certain pastor from Pennside went to a local convenience store and asked them to put up a poster regarding our 2nd Saturday service. The clerk declined saying that her manager had told her she couldn't put it up because it was religious and might offend somebody. In the interest of full disclosure, one of our elders later went to the same store and they did put up our poster for Scottish Communion demonstrating yet again that elders are much less offensive than pastors.

I was confused when the clerk told me that; I didn't know what to make of this strange place and these strange people. And I wonder if our origin story can help us with our confusion, because the gloom and doom headlines are taking a toll.

We look around and realize we aren't where we've been, and we're not where we're going; and it's another rather than turning to one another. It's easy to divide rather than sticking together.

Remember our origin story: *Acts 2:1 (NRSV) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. They were waiting. They were watching. They were praying. Jesus had promised them power from on high, and they were anticipating and expecting Jesus to fulfill that promise at any moment.*

Objectively: they were a small band of Galileans who followed a crucified and discredited teacher. Objectively: they would either soon be re-absorbed into the mainstream of Judaism or they would join their teacher on a cross. But that small band wasn't a group of Galileans anymore. They were Christians, the first Christians, and they expected God to keep his promise.

This isn't an answer. It isn't a program. It is an attitude; an attitude of hope; hope our origin story calls us to re-claim in the midst of our confusion in this strange place amid these strange people. We're not where we've been, and we're not where we're going, but Jesus has promised that we will get there. *Acts 2:21 (NRSV) ... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* And I wonder if the first thing we can do today is to turn to God and confess our powerlessness and need. I wonder if the new beginning we long for will emerge from our lack of certainty and our confusion as we learn once again to anticipate and expect and depend on Jesus' promise. I wonder if God is once again preparing his people for the next step in God's transformation of the world, perhaps even a new Pentecost.

2. Pentecost: Clarity

When we hear our Pentecost origin story, we naturally focus on the “tongues as of fire,” the “rushing wind,” and the apostles speaking in other languages. We focus on the spectacular and look at our ordinary obedience and think there’s something missing, but the miracle of Pentecost isn’t found in the spectacular; the miracle is in the ordinary understanding that results from the apostles’ proclamation. The crowd understands. They have clarity. They know who they are. They know where they are from. They know this shouldn’t be possible, *Acts 2:11–12 (NRSV)* — *in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.*¹² *All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”*

Defense mechanisms promptly and predictably kick in, *Acts 2:13 (NRSV)* *But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”*

They know better. They know that God is doing something new; the promise of God is being fulfilled right before their eyes; they see it clearly and that challenges them to respond. Human nature being what it is; they resist that challenge (as we do) for it is a challenge to change, to transformation.

Notice how Peter responds to their resistance. He doesn’t get angry. He raises his voice but he doesn’t yell. He doesn’t get defensive and try to defend God. Peter’s attitude of hope gives him the freedom to be funny. He uses humor to disarm the resistance; it’s too early to be that drunk, and then he quotes the prophet Joel to help them make sense of this experience and recognize the opportunity: *Acts 2:21 (NRSV)* *Then [Now!] everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’*

N. T. Wright comments: ‘Being saved’ doesn’t just mean, as it does for many today, ‘going to heaven when they die’. It means ‘knowing God’s rescuing power, the power revealed in Jesus, which anticipates, in the present, God’s final great act of deliverance’. Peter ... [goes] on to encourage his hearers to ‘call on the Lord’s name’, and so to know that ‘salvation’, that rescue, as a present reality as well as a future hope. If these really are ‘the last days’, then ‘salvation’ has already begun. Anyone who knows they need rescuing, whatever from, can ‘call on the Lord’ and discover how it can happen.¹

And should anyone wonder if even this age of “nones” is still seeking salvation, consider the following from Avengers: The Age of Ultron:

Ultron: Stark asked for a savior, and settled for a slave.

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 34). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

The Vision: I suppose we're both disappointments.

Ultron: [laughs] I suppose we are.

The Vision: Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites and try to control what won't be. But there is grace in their failings. I think you missed that.

Ultron: They're doomed!

The Vision: Yes... but a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts. It is a privilege to be among them.

Ultron: You're unbelievably naïve.

The Vision: Well, I was born yesterday.

Ultron: [sitting in a church] They put the building in the middle of the city, so that everyone could be equally close to God. I like that, the symmetry, the geometry of belief.

We're not where we were. We're not where we're going to be, but the promise is sure, *Acts 2:21 (NRSV) Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* Remember our origin story. Remember Pentecost. Jesus kept his promise then, and he is still keeping his promise. Keep this hope in your heart.. Be ready for the next chapter in our origin story (because if there's one thing "The Avengers" series has taught us it is that there will be a sequel!). Be ready for the next Pentecost when Jesus transforms our confusion into clarity. Amen.