

## SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

### *Walking in Fiery Footsteps*

Acts 2:1-21

June 8, 2025

It was a Pentecost moment that no one knew was coming. It was a Pentecost moment no one knew we needed. It was certainly a Pentecost moment that no one would have asked for.

The boat was sinking. Though, we did not know it. You see, we were on day six of our Footsteps of Faith pilgrimage, and we had just finished the day on the sacred island of Patmos. We had been to the Grotto of Revelation, the Cave of Apocalypse where it is said that John received his revelation. In many ways, it had been one of those mountaintop faith kinds of days. There had been vulnerable sharing, intimate connection, tears had been shed. The day had been one thick with the Holy Spirit.

Surely, the Pentecost moment had already come.

Infused with the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we joyfully and gleefully hopped back onto the boat that had gotten us to Patmos, intent on riding the holy waves of the Spirit all the way back to our hotel in Samos, where a relaxing evening with dinner on the pier awaited us. The journey began simply and smoothly enough. There were lots of smiles and lots of selfies. And then, a peculiar thing happened. We hit a few waves that felt a little different. They were choppy than anything we had felt previously.

We had been warned that, at times, the ride home can be a bit bumpy, so we didn't pay it too much mind. And then, another big bump came, and it seemed to knock the boat off course. Different. But perhaps just one final rush of wind from the Holy Spirit.

And so, because the boat had been redirected a bit, the captain and crew had us do a U-turn of sorts to get us back on course. But again, another big bump, and we were knocked off course again. Our boat turned around, and we assumed another U-turn was coming, but that was not the

case, the boat was headed back to Patmos. Again, different. But, we had also been warned of this possibility. Sometimes, the waters back to Samos are just too choppy, and, at times, it becomes necessary to spend the night in Patmos.

Surely, the Holy Spirit must be up to something. After all, scripture tells us that the wind blows where it chooses. The Holy Spirit is not one to be tamed. And so, back to Patmos we went. By this time, most of our group had made their way up to the second level of the boat, intent on sitting outside to avoid getting seasick and to see the beautiful scenery. There were rumblings of the smell of gas on the lower level of the boat. It gets better.

Introvert that I am, I took a moment of introverted isolation, and I made my way down the stairs to the lower level of the boat. This is when I noticed something very different was, in fact, happening. It may have been the inner rumblings of the Holy Spirit. But, if the Holy Spirit is supposed to be our comforter, I wasn't necessary picking up comforting vibes. There was a lot of movement and motion amongst the captain and the crew. There was, indeed, a strong smell of gas that seemed mildly problematic. But no alarms had been sounded, no announcements of an emergency or impending doom and been proclaimed, the life jackets were still safely stowed away. And so, trying to do my best Jesus impersonation, I tried to stay calm while on a boat that bounced back and forth. Surely, the Holy Spirit is simply just rushing in through the winds of the Aegean Sea one last time.

And then it happened.

I happened to glance at the back of the boat, and that's when I noticed a member of the crew remove a cushion to a long and padded bench, and, taking a large bucket, he started scooping out buckets full of water, throwing the

water overboard back into the sea. Something was at work, and it seemed it was certainly not the Holy Spirit. And just as soon as the rush of fear and worry and anxiety began to set in, the violent rush from the winds of a much larger boat came up beside us.

What then followed was a chaotic—and yet well-choreographed—scene where the Hellenic Coast Guard tied our much smaller boat to their much larger boat. And then, our group was instructed to leap from our boat to the boat of the coast guard.

Once we were all to the safety of our new vessel, the engine of our original boat was turned off, and slowly it began to succumb to the sea, steadily submerging under the water while being towed along towards the pier. Our boat had been sinking!

It was a Pentecost moment that no one knew was coming. It was a Pentecost moment no one knew we needed. It was certainly a Pentecost moment that no one had expected.

But it wasn't the thrill and the terror of discovering that we had been on a sinking boat that made this a Pentecost moment. It is what happened after. Once we were able to get settled and centrally located within Patmos, this is when the divided tongues of fire began to appear, each of us processing the events in our own unique ways, in our own unique language. And yet, I watched and witnessed as this group began to speak each other's language fluently.

There was understandable panic that was tended to with an attentive tenderness. There was space made for silent and quiet reflections. There was the opportunity for raucous and raw accounts of all that had happened. There was a sacred and shared meal of gelato—a sugary delight that allowed us to communally begin to settle. Tears could be shed. Hands could be held. Hugs were held for just a bit longer. Pentecost happened.

While not typically achieved through sinking boats, since the year 2000, the annual Footsteps of Faith pilgrimage for high school seniors to Greece, Turkey, and Italy has been providing the space and opportunity for these young people to have an intimate encounter with the Holy Spirit. Pentecost through pilgrimage.

Footsteps of Faith happens at a tender time, a pivotal moment of profound transition and change. There is much to joyfully anticipate, and there is much to anxiously await. High school is finished, a chapter is closing, a phase of life is ending, formative identities are being shed, relationships and friendships are shifting. It is a time ripe for the howling winds of the Holy Spirit to rush onto the scene.

They, too, were in a tender time of profound transition. Just one chapter earlier, the impending baptism of the Holy Spirit has been promised. Jesus has ascended, lifted and taken out of their sight. And after casting lots, Matthias is chosen to replace Judas.

And so here they are—the faithful followers of Jesus—all together in one place, huddled together in a house, anxiously waiting for what is to come.

So much in their life has changed. So much in their life has been lost. There is much to anticipate, and so much to anxiously await. The Holy Spirit has certainly been hovering, and now the fiery winds will rush in and consume them.

It was a Pentecost moment they did not know was coming. It was a Pentecost moment no one knew they needed. It was certainly the Pentecost moment they had hoped for.

And I imagine that this scene had to be similar to our moment of Pentecost in Patmos. Surely, the panic of it all for some was tempered by the tenderness of others. Surely, even the joyous exclamations allowed for space to be held for silent and quiet reflection. Surely, there was raucous and raw accounts of all that was happening. Surely, tears were shed. Surely, there was embrace—hands being held, hugs that were especially tight.

It was, as theologian Willie James Jennings calls it, “the revolution of the intimate.”<sup>1</sup> The intimate sharing not just of language, but the intimate sharing of lives, the intimate invitation to incarnationally encounter one another, to engage and experience one another in the fullness of their humanity. The promise had been fulfilled. Pentecost became baptism, baptism with the Holy Spirit, and it was as if everyone joyfully and gleefully shouted, “The water feels great, come on in!” The shared language became a communal splashing in the waters together.

Pentecost happened. Pentecost shapes us. Pentecost gives us, as Craig Dykstra calls it, “the language of faith.” And, as Dykstra says:

[This] religious language is indispensable to religious faith and community [because] such language makes possible historical continuity. It is a factor in the perpetuation of the faith and community over time and across generations.<sup>2</sup>

And so, leaning on these wise words, we come to recognize that Pentecost shapes us because Pentecost isn't simply a one-time occurrence. Pentecost has happened, and Pentecost is still happening. The winds are still rushing in, and the flames are still full and vibrant with the vocabulary of our faith.

But Dykstra also wisely offers us a word of caution:

But this use of language raises the possibility of a great temptation. The community may fall into self-idolatry. When the religious community uses its language simply for self-perpetuation, then God has been captured as the god of the religious cultus and is no longer the God of all of life. And this, in turn, makes the valid use of religious language in everyday life impossible.<sup>3</sup>

This is not unlike what Peter cautioned in that very first Pentecost sermon when he leaned into the prophetic language of his faith and tradition and community and boldly proclaimed, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” Pentecost is for everyone. Pentecost happens because Pentecost is the intimate invitation for everyone. The Holy Spirit will not be controlled or contained. It is poured out in abundant portions for everyone, the language of faith made accessible and available to all.

Pentecost shapes us. Pentecost gifts us with the Holy Spirit such that the language of faith takes the shape of an intimate and inclusive sharing and listening.

And, I wonder, what might that sound like? Where might those divided tongues of fire be located for the church today? Well, taking our cue from Peter, I think the daughters and sons of Second Presbyterian Church are a great place to start. They've received the language of faith, raised in the

rhetoric and rhythms of this community of faith. They've listened so well. They've been shaped, and they now have a robust language of faith to share with us.

And so, friends, I invite you to hear, to listen intently to, the intimate language of faith from the voices and the experiences of former Footsteps pilgrims.

“Footsteps of Faith was not only a step out of my comfort zone, but was a huge step for me spiritually. There are aspects of myself and my faith that I learned throughout Footsteps that I still hold in my heart today, three years later. My faith grew stronger as I entered into college, and still holds as part of the foundation of my faith today! The relationships I created throughout the trip still stand today, and I'll be telling about the impact of that trip until the day I die!! I miss it so much, and would do anything to go back.”

“One of my favorite moments on our Footsteps trip came on the final night. Throughout the trip, we had been told to stay out of each other's hotel rooms. We were pretty good about this until the last night we were all together. After returning from a long day in Rome, everyone had checked in for the night. The students on the trip had a small group chat together to talk and share plans. I received a text saying that we were all going to meet in one of the larger hotel rooms to spend one final moment together before our flight home. Everyone arrived at the room, and we originally had just planned to play a card game. After a few rounds of the game, we stopped and all started talking about our favorite moments throughout the trip. This resulted in everyone opening up to each other. I learned so much more about my fellow footsteps members than I could have ever imagined. Tears were shed and laughs were shared. We ended the night with a big group hug and a prayer together. We began that journey as good friends, but we returned as a family. I love that group, every single one of them. That is a day that I will never forget and will keep with me for the rest of my life.”

“One of the most impactful moments of Footsteps was seeing the island of Patmos, and the Holy Cave of the Apocalypse. Revelation 21:4 was one verse that helped me grieve the sudden death of my cousin when I was in 8th grade. By being in the place where God revealed himself to John so that he could write those words that had helped

me through a difficult time, I am convicted of the reality, presence, and closeness of Jesus in my life."

"At the time of traveling overseas, I was at a low point in my life in terms of physical and mental health due to my eating disorder, and while I was on the trip I felt almost every issue related to that be washed away, and when I returned home it proved to be the major turning point in my recovery. I think a lot of that can just be explained by the sort of vacation aspect of the trip removing a lot of my anxieties, but I also recall that constantly being in spaces and engaging in conversations that were spiritually nourishing really did wonders for the way that I was feeling. And in terms of how the trip affected my faith: last year I was at my most doubtful and skeptical of Christianity, even at a point of deciding I was no longer religious, but the experience of the footsteps class and trip showed me that being in holy spaces and holy communities made me feel so much more refreshed and comforted, even though I didn't understand why for the longest time. Over the past several months I've come to understand that not understanding is okay, and what's more important than ironing out every detail of a creed or faith is the very real and undeniable beauty and healing found in the Christian community that I'm surrounded by. The footsteps class and especially the trip provided a guiding light for my journey over the past year or so, and looking back I'm so happy that I had that presence to connect me and call me to God in a way that I couldn't even see was happening at the time."

Friends, Pentecost is still happening.

It was a Pentecost moment that no one knew was coming. It was a Pentecost moment no one knew we needed. It was certainly a Pentecost moment, that looking back, everyone did, in fact, want.

You see, there was an unspoken tradition in youth ministries that involved Purell and a lighter. I'll say no more than this: holy mischief is the second language of youth ministry. And, as a part of this tradition, on the last night, the adult

leaders would stay up a bit later and have a little fiery fun. It was always safe and contained. Until that one night in Rochester, Pennsylvania.

After combining the traditional ingredients of Purell and fire, a long and wild trail of flames blazed. We marveled at its beauty. And then it happened. One of the volunteers, perhaps overcome by the Holy Spirit, but more likely overcome by the delusion of sleep deprivation and the joyous inspiration that comes along with spending a week with youth, decided to run through the flames. What this volunteer and the rest of us did not anticipate was the Purell sticking to their sandals.

And so, instead of a tongue of fire, it was feet of fire! Flaming flip flops were flung high in the air. With the health and safety of all participants confirmed, and a few leg hairs burned, the rushing winds of uncontrollable laughter took over. Pentecost through passionate laughter.

The footsteps of our faith are fiery ones. The language of our faith is fiery. Pentecost is our shared language of faith. Pentecost is our shaping language of faith. And the Holy Spirit is our enthusiastic interpreter, ensuring that this shaping and sharing remain intimately inclusive.

Pentecost isn't something that we simply learn. It isn't simply a story we hear year after year. Over and over and over again, Pentecost shapes us. Over and over again, Pentecost happens to us. The winds rush in, and the flames blaze brightly.

So, friends, let's slide on our flip flops. Let's hop onto a boat. Let's dive into the waters and continue to share the fiery language of our faith. Pentecost is still happening. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 118-119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 119.