

## Flames of Pentecost and Protest

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Christians all over the country are celebrating fire this weekend.

In the calendar that is followed by many branches of the Christian family tree, this is Pentecost Sunday. A Jewish holiday marking the reception of Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), Pentecost in Christianity marks a moment of a mass theophany. As the disciples, post-Easter mystery, gather for a celebration, a Christian testament called the Acts of the Apostles reads “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” In the telling, thousands of Pentecost pilgrims are given the ability to speak and be understood in the language of any and all hearers in the aftermath of violence and flame.

Peter was a disciple of Jesus, who was always struggling to understand who was the most important to Jesus, who once told Jesus to shut up when Jesus warned of coming violence, and who denied knowing Jesus after Jesus’s arrest. Peter interprets the moment as a fulfillment of a prophesy by one of his faith ancestors. He says that this is the moment Joel suggested would come, a final collision between human history and the divine, in which young people become prophets, elders have dreams, and even enslaved people are gifted with God’s power.

Oh, for that day of apocalypse to come. Oh, wait, it already has, over and burning over again.

At its root, apocalypse means uncovered or revealed rather than end times, as it has more recently come to imply. In an apocalypse, a truth is revealed.

And through fire, once again, our nation’s truth about African Americans has been revealed. Truth: The lives of people of color are valued less than those of white people. The death we all could watch live and in color in Minneapolis never would have happened had George Floyd been white. And, as you all know, his death is far from unique; it is in no way an outlier.

And so Minneapolis burns and New York is bloodied and New Orleans is rubber bulletted. The response of Black America, and of those who are not only their passive allies but are also actively uncovering racial disparities in policing, education, health care, and everything else, are revealing the justifiable rage and pain black people’s bodies carry every day and have done for generations. If you have found the threat of the coronavirus unsettling and stressful these last few months, try a lifetime of being an African American man. As a white woman, I don’t know from stress.

So what are the implications of the fire, both that of Pentecost and of America?

Many Christians interpret the Pentecost story as a call to go to all nations, speaking whatever language necessary, to share what we call the good news of Jesus Christ. That good news being that love is worth living for unto death, and that state-sanctioned and enacted death cannot stop or silence that love, only make it stronger. That message could be used as a way to look past the state’s actions and focus only on life after death. But the message of love should make us strong enough to be accountable for all of the times in which we have refused to understand the language of others.

Hear, oh white America: Our African American siblings have suffocated for so long that the only oxygen they have left is that which makes these fires burn. The only way to stop that fire is for us to take it on ourselves, to let it alight on our own heads, that we might join our own voices to the chorus without the protective defensiveness of doubt.

And do not doubt this: When fires begin, they will not end until their truth is revealed and interpreted accurately. White Christian America, on this Pentecost Sunday, do not merely celebrate that flame of holiness, but let it fuel your living for love even though it means the death of your illusions, your comfort, and your politeness. For it is only on the other side of our state-sanctioned deaths that there will be any kind of life.

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