



# Tarry Awhile

**Selina Stone introduces the Black Christian spiritual practice of 'Tarrying', in which believers actively wait to experience a manifestation of God's presence.**

**It has much to teach us in the life of faith, she writes - we are all tarrying for something.**

**T**arrying is a spiritual practice common to some Pentecostal churches, inspired by the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. In this passage of scripture, the disciples are gathered 'in one place' waiting or *tarrying* from the gift promised them by Jesus before his Ascension. Sure enough, the Spirit comes upon the disciples, in an unpredictable fashion: *'what seemed to be*

*tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them'* (Acts 2:3). The disciples speak in other languages, and people from many ethnic groups are able to hear *'them declaring the wonders of God'* in their own tongues (Acts 2:12).

The practice of tarrying for the Holy Spirit is not common across all or even most Pentecostal churches today. But it has its roots in a particular set of beliefs, that baptism in the Holy Spirit was a separate event in the life of the believer. This event needed to be evidenced by something, and the sign was speaking in tongues. This has never been agreed on by all Pentecostals, even from the start of what we know as Classical Pentecostalism at Azusa Street in 1906. But speaking in tongues often features heavily in Pentecostal and wider charismatic gatherings.

When practised, believers are invited to gather, with those who need to tarry for the gift of the Spirit being centred. Usually, there are older people in the faith and others who have already received their Pentecost, ready to lay hands and pray for the one who is still to receive theirs. Singing and intercessions will take place, growing in intensity, as the person prays and is prayed for, oscillating between weeping, speech, groaning and even silent waiting. The intercessors will sometimes discern a breakthrough is coming, and in some cases, the person will eventually burst forth with a language they have not learned, often accompanied by tears. In other cases, there is no outward sign, and so the person may be expected to tarry more, or simply to be content with the ministry which has supported them on that particular day.

This practice of hopeful waiting on God's presence and intervention has much to teach us in the life of faith. Whatever we might think about baptism in the Spirit or speaking in tongues, it is safe to say that in our lives of faith, we are all tarrying for something. You may not be tarrying for a spiritual gift, it may be for a sense of calling or direction, a dream or hope deferred. This expectant waiting or tarrying is common to all of our lives as people of faith in a much broader sense. This is I think, the wisdom that Black Pentecostal spirituality, here exemplified in the practice of tarrying, has to offer us.

Prayer and waiting can be frustrating aspects of our lives of faith. The delay in what we hope for, or the fact that we may never have it at all, can be heartbreaking. We can experience this disappointment in relatively minor ways which we can easily recover from, but also in life-changing realities which we cannot simply overlook. Sometimes our disappointment can totally upend our lives and our faith.

In more recent years I have come to look back to the faith of my ancestors whose belief in Jesus' presence and love for them remained strong in the face of the unthinkable. I think far back to the generations of my African and Caribbean ancestors who found

ways to remain connected to God even when their spiritual practices were under threat. They discerned between the false God shared with them by European slavers, and kept their eyes on Jesus. They recognised God as their liberator and held onto their faith in the God of Moses and the children of Israel who left Egypt. Faith was not something to question, it was their solid ground.

I think more recently of my grandparents who arrived in the UK from Jamaica in the early 1960s and were determined to remain for the sake of their children and grandchildren. Their churches were a haven, for sharing knowledge about jobs and schools, and for the spiritual renewal that reminded them that they had a divine name, better than whatever they may have been called during the week on the street or in work. Tarrying was for them a daily practice, not for the gift of tongues but the gifts of wisdom, and strength for the days ahead of them.

Tarrying, therefore, offers us important resources when we find ourselves in a state of struggle, of wondering where God is. In writing about tarrying this Lent, in my book *Tarry Awhile*, it became clear to me that there is so much in this tradition for those who are conscious of the world in which we live. It is easy and even understandable to be overwhelmed by the pain and violence we see in our human family each week. Whether at home or abroad we can find ourselves at a loss of what to say or do. Tarrying, the commitment to wait on God, is not an invitation to do nothing, but to receive from the one who knows all, loves all, and holds all things together.

In these moments, we might gain all we need to continue to struggle with hope, for a future of justice, peace and righteousness.



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