I don’t really have a bucket list per se, no itemized to-do list of experiences to undertake before I shuffle off this mortal coil; but if I were making such a list, it would certainly include experiencing just one Pentecost worship service at the Pantheon in Rome.

The domed roof of the Pantheon has at its apex a huge oculus that focuses the sun’s rays like a searchlight beam, and at midday, as the organ music swells, representatives from Rome’s fire brigade cast dozens of sacksful of bright red rose petals through the oculus from the roof above, and they float down like tiny tongues of flame falling upon the crowd gathered for worship. I spent far too long this week watching YouTube videos of the spectacle—the soaring domed ceiling, the brilliant piercing light from the heavens, the spirit-signifying petals cascading down like a soft red rain, and pooling on the floor below, as if you could scoop up a good-sized double handful of the Holy Spirit and carry it away with you. I can’t say just what captivated me when I first witnessed the scene—the sharp focus of the light, the beauty of
the rose petals, the sheer abundance of the outpouring… I can only imagine being there, it is one of the more spectacular commemorations of the day of Pentecost I have seen.

But then I took a flight of imagination. I imagined being there….and I began to wonder—what if, in the midst of the assembled crowd, some of them reverent, some of them festive, some snapping cell phone selfies of the spectacle to post to Facebook, what if one of those rose petals drifted down and settled ever so lightly, yet ever so specifically, ever so intentionally upon my head? What might it DO to me—or ask of me? I began to wonder in other words, in my Pentecostal ponderings, how is the Holy Spirit at work in the world today? How is the Spirit at work in my life today? Or in the life of our church? What is the Spirit calling us to? And I realized that many of my own associations, the verbs that I tend to assign to the Spirit’s work are words like comfort, or console, or inspire, or renew, and every once in a while, nudge… words that fall gently like a rose petal rain upon the ear.

And I thought, “Oh my goodness, I really AM Presbyterian. But based upon the Biblical text, there are other words that should be a part of my Spirit
vocabulary—words like impel, or compel, or propel, or upset, or commission, or embolden, or transform, or restore.

I thought of the language in our first Scripture lesson, the baptism of Jesus—"just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from heaven—'You are my Son the beloved, with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness."

You can hear the restless energy coursing through that text—the heavens torn apart, the spirit descending, immediately driving him into the wilderness—this feels like an inbreaking, uncontainable, unrestrainable, irresistible. And in the wilderness, Jesus will be tempted and tested to the limits of his human endurance, his commitment forged, his earthly ministry formed. And he will experience, we presume, a calling to a lifetime of servanthood and self-denial. Recall the text from Isaiah that Jesus selects for his first sermon in Luke’s gospel—it gives a sense of what it is to have God’s spirit descend upon him:
The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor. This having the Spirit of the Lord rest upon one is not a strange warming of the heart, or a gentle inward assurance. It is a mission from God to the world.

Now I had never before thought of connecting the descent of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus with the movement of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost—but the scenes are remarkably similar (for effect, I’m going to overlay one with the other)—we hear a similar burst of kinetic energy: when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place—and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, (the heavens were torn apart) and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them and rested on each of them (the spirit of the Lord descended like a dove upon him)—literally, if you will, the Spirit of the Lord is upon them as well—and just as Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness to be tested, to be tried, to be tempted—so his gathered followers on Pentecost are immediately thrust out into the world, with a story to tell to the nations.
Bringing good news to the oppressed, by the way, is going to put them in direct contact and in direct conflict with the oppressors, just as Jesus himself was; and the binding of the brokenhearted—well, I don’t think that can be done without one’s own heart breaking a little bit too. Liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners—that’s a message of radical forgiveness, forgiveness of debts, forgiveness of crimes. It is a message of a new world order, an inbreaking of God’s kingdom, an outbreak of mercy, compassion, and healing.

And returning to the Pentecost text, we see that what begins in a small room of assembled followers begins to spread—well, it begins to spread like wildfire. The list of nations detailed in the passage is a not exhaustive but thorough listing of the nations of the known Mediterranean world at the time, and a footnote in my study Bible points out a generalized movement in the listed nations from East to West, as if the work of the gospel is marching outward and eventually encircling the globe, like a wave, or like a wind: irresistible, a restless, relentless force of renewal.

Well, all of that circles back to my earlier musings, thinking about those rose petals cascading down from above, about what it might mean to be
touched by one: what it would mean to experience symbolically, that the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, as well.

And it struck me that our role, our task, our calling is not merely to commemorate Pentecost but to continue it. We don’t fully or faithfully celebrate the work of the Spirit by wearing red, or dumping rose petals, or releasing red helium balloons—we do it when we live as if the Spirit of the Lord is upon us: when we help the homeless, welcome the stranger, when we offer legitimate refuge to refugees, speak the words of redemption and hope to the ones whom the world has called irredeemable and hopeless. We celebrate the work of the Spirit when we stand up to the powerful on behalf of the powerless, when we insist that the ones who need a break are the poor and not the privileged, when we begin to view inmates in our prisons like possibilities instead of liabilities, like they are redeemable instead of irredeemable, when we proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

If the Spirit comforts us, it calls us also to be comforters, if it inspires us it compels us to live as if the breath of God is in us (that’s what inspire means, isn’t it—to breathe in), if it opens us to newness and possibility, in so doing, it requires us to let go of what is comfortable or traditional.
What would it be to have the spirit rain down upon us? Right now? Today?

For our potential energy to suddenly be transformed into kinetic energy?

I love the poem included in your bulletin as a preparation for worship: It is entitled Pentecostal Hour, by Mark DeBolt:

No zephyr soft  
but cyclone strong  
bore thoughts aloft  
in windy song.

No flicker mild  
but flames of red  
danced hot and wild  
upon each head.

And so fierce was  
our thundering word  
in languages  
of all who heard,

all knew it meant  
the Spirit’s power.  
This was our Pentecostal hour.

What if today were our Pentecostal hour—and we once and for all stopped  
lamenting that the institutional church is no longer what it used to be and  
we started to live as though the Spirit of the Lord were upon us? How  
might we be driven forth?

Amen