

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Acts 2:1-18 *"They Speak Our Language"*

The gift that Jesus had promised he and his Father would send his disciples arrived like a wind storm. About 120 of them were gathered in a house in Jerusalem, waiting and praying as they had been told, when the sound of a violent wind suddenly filled the house. It was, I suspect, like a twister coming very close to your home – like the roar of a train, and everything shook. The "wind of God" was blowing, the one Jesus had spoken about to Nicodemus; the one you can hear but not see, that you have no control over, but which produces remarkable effects. The Holy Spirit was coming "in power" on Jesus' disciples.

He had said it would be like a "baptism" – as though you were suddenly immersed in deep water, or deluged by huge pots of water thrown over your head, and you emerged spluttering, symbolically cleansed, remade. The wind of God, the Spirit of God, the breath of God, were bringing new spiritual life into the disciples, and they would never be the same again. On the day of Pentecost, there was fire as well as wind, and "what seemed to be tongues of fire" settled and remained on each person. Like the burning bush, they were not consumed, but God was present.

1) *What Does This Mean?*

We don't know how long this drama lasted, or what the disciples felt or understood at

the time. What we do know is that when they left the house and went out into the streets of Jerusalem, people immediately noticed that something had happened to them. They began to proclaim "the wonders of God" to anyone who would listen – and there were a lot of people in the city for Pentecost, a feast each year in early June that often attracted more people even than Passover.

All the disciples on whom the Spirit had come were now "prophesying" – that is, speaking for and about God – male and female, young and old. And they were doing it in the languages of the thousands of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the feast – Jews of the Dispersion, converts to Judaism called proselytes, half-converts called "god-fearers." Doubtless many of the visitors spoke Aramaic or Greek, but that day instead they heard their own native tongues telling about God and his mighty acts through this Jesus.

They were peoples from the east – from what today we call Iran and Iraq, and up around the Caspian Sea, where Jews had been dispersed since the 8th C. BC by the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests; peoples from all over what we call Turkey, the Roman province of Asia, up around the Black Sea, where Jews had been for 600 years; peoples from the Arabian peninsula; peoples from Egypt and North Africa as far west as

Alexandria, in what we today call Libya; people from Greece and from Rome – the hundreds of thousands of “Jews of the Dispersion” were represented in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and heard the gospel of Jesus in their own native languages.

“What does this mean?” they asked. Some critics thought it was just babble, and put it down to wine, not the wind of the Spirit. But Peter stood up and explained: “this is that which was prophesied...” He recites the words of the prophet Joel about “the Day of the LORD,” when God’s goodness would once again shine on his people, and justice and salvation would come to Israel. “Today” said Peter, “is the Day... this is the start of ‘the last days,’ now that Jesus has come.” This is when the Spirit of God is “poured out” and will *remain* on all the people who enter God’s kingdom through faith in Jesus. This is the day when the curse of divided languages and alienated peoples dating back to the tower of Babel is broken; this is the day when all peoples hear the words of God in their own language.

2) Other Tongues

But, some of you are saying, “I’m confused.” Doesn’t the rest of the NT, especially Paul’s letters, take “speaking in other tongues” to mean Spirit-inspired, ecstatic, speech in praise of God that is unintelligible to others unless someone with the gift of “interpretation” is present? Paul contrasts “tongues” with “prophesying” in which people speak clearly about God. What’s different here at Pentecost?

Some NT scholars of a skeptical bent of course simply say “Luke got it wrong;” he wasn’t in Jerusalem at Pentecost, he misunderstood the reports he heard. But that won’t do for anyone who takes the inspiration and canon of Scripture seriously. Something happened in Jerusalem at Pentecost that had not happened before and didn’t happen again. The event has been called “the birthday of the Church” because it *was* a unique event, and because that day the gospel of Jesus was proclaimed to Jews

from all the known Mediterranean world, as a symbol and a precursor of the proclamation to the Gentiles that would occur over the next 30 years.

The spiritual “gift of tongues” to certain people is another matter, and not to be confused with the unique outpouring of the Spirit of God on the gathered community of Jesus at Pentecost. Both had their purpose; what they have in common is the word “tongues” and the fact that skeptics consider both of them - then and now - as being akin to madness or drunkenness. But skeptics do not know the power of God, and do not control the work of his Spirit.

3) They Speak Our Language!

Pentecost was a unique event, but what was its purpose, what was its significance, what is its relevance for us? I believe it lies in that simple statement of the crowds, “the Christians are *speaking our language*.” The means God chose to extend his kingdom, to spread the gospel of redemption in his Son, was that the Christians should speak the language of their hearers.

What languages do you speak? If we were to go around this congregation, I’m guessing that apart from a dozen forms of inflected English, we would also find the ability to read or speak Spanish, German, Italian, French, maybe Polish or Greek, perhaps a couple of Scandinavian languages, Dutch, Russian, Japanese, Mandarin...? Have I missed any? Have you ever thought how you could use that knowledge to advance the kingdom of God and spread the gospel of Jesus? Have you ever considered teaching ESL - “English as a Second Language” – or tutoring recent immigrants, or translating for social service agencies or courts? Do you understand that when Christians who have the Spirit of God in them do these things, they transfer more than language?

What other “languages” do you speak? Some of you speak the language of parenting. You know what it means to care for, encourage, protect, guide, shape the values of, run all

over town for, school-aged children. When Christians who have the Spirit of God in them share their parenting skills with other parents, they transfer much more. Some of you speak the language of youth, high school, college; you know the stresses on family life, the frantic search for direction, the struggle over priorities and values, the sacrifices, the cost, the anxiety mixed with pride, all that goes with that decade from 14 to 24 or so. When Christians with the Spirit of God in them share their experiences with other parents, and with other parents' sons and daughters who need adult input from outside their families, Christians share more than they know.

Some of you know what becoming an "empty-nester," or dealing with early retirement means; how hard it is to re-orient yourself when the work that defined your life is over, when the people are gone, the kids are gone, your marriage has to be reworked, your priorities for time and money revised, your own parents have to be cared for, you want to be valued as grandparents. Some of you know what it means to find yourself unemployed when retirement is not a possibility, and the painful readjustment of taking work far below the seniority and skill and pay level you used to enjoy. When Christians with the Spirit of God in them go through these times, they can model for others and share with others the power and presence and guidance of God in the midst of unexpected changes in life.

Some of you speak the language of old age, senior years, the "golden years" or whatever we are supposed to call them now! You know what it means to struggle with health issues, endless Doctor visits, limited money, rising costs; and how hard that makes it to grow old gracefully, gratefully, an example of wisdom and contentment. Christians who age well in the power of the Spirit can make a difference to others who are only learning to complain and to criticize.

Think of all the other "languages" we speak. Some of you know small business, and what

a Christian business person can teach about reliability, quality, integrity, honesty, being a self-starter, perseverance through the ups and downs of the economy. Some of you are managers and consultants, who know that Christians in the workplace are sorely needed to model and promote honesty, transparency, compassion, integrity, human values, wisdom. Some of you know science, and how Christians have to stand against the rat-race for publication, funding, prestige, space, and the petty egotism that makes academia so tiresome. Some of you know the language of healthcare, and how Christians are needed to humanize the medical bureaucracy, to ensure fair and honest pricing, to treat patients as whole people and not as diseased organs, to adjust schedules so that people are not made to wait endlessly - just to ensure they learn whose time is valuable and whose is not!

Some of you are engineers, and know that Christians ought to be in the forefront of excellent design, quality construction, true testing, fair pricing. Some are in sales, and know how Christians need to work for honesty in advertising, keeping of promises, and fair contracts. Some work in human resources and know Christians cannot make decisions on hiring and firing and benefits based solely on the bottom line; won't dump senior workers for cheaper part-time no-benefit younger ones, won't get rid of people who are getting sick so they don't cost the company money.

Some of you - many in fact - are teachers, educators at all levels from pre-school to high school to graduate school to administration; you know how mandates and testing and funding and liability now constrain education so that it has too little to do with the intellectual, social, physical, moral, emotional needs of children, and how Christians should be in the forefront of educational reform at every level.

How many "languages" do we speak between us? And how can we take the power of the Spirit of God that is in us into our homes, into our workplaces, into our

communities; and become examples of integrity and speak words of wisdom that will support people who are desperate for help, or don't know where to find it, but who are deeply affected by peers who "speak their language."

Christians can talk only to one another, and that may be very comfortable, but the danger is becoming insular, unaware of what is going on in the wider world, unable to speak its language. But there are people all over town: neighbors on your street, moms and dads watching sports, co-workers in your plant or office or lab, who need your friendship, example, support, prayers; coming from someone who speaks their language and who also knows the power of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Who can you help? Where can you extend God's kingdom by word or deed? What "languages" do you speak, and how can the Spirit work through you to bring his power to bear on needy lives?

Let us pray...