

“In Our Own Languages”

“... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Niagara Falls, Ontario attracts visitors from around the world, speaking a vast multitude of languages as they gaze upon one of the natural wonders of the world. During the years that Susan and I lived in the Falls, it was always a fascinating experience to walk among these visitors, seeing and hearing people from around the world all experiencing the same thrilling sight. But from time to time, I would wonder what would happen if for some reason an emergency message needed to be shared; how would you communicate something of vital importance so that everyone could hear and understand in their own languages?

“Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.”

This was the challenge the apostles faced in Jerusalem as they observed the gathering of the Jewish people in the holy city for the festival known as “Pentecost,” a word meaning “fiftieth day” that was used by Diaspora Jews for a day-long harvest festival more commonly known as the “Feast of Weeks” (*Shavuot*) that was observed fifty days following Passover in accordance with the teachings of the Torah:

- “You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.” – Exodus 23:16.
- “You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year.” – Exodus 34:22.
- “And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation-offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the LORD.” – Leviticus 23:15-16.

Pentecost was one of the three pilgrimage feasts *“when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God toward the nation.”* (Robert W. Wall).

In the midst of this gathering of Jews from all part of the Mediterranean world are the apostles, who for the past ten days have been waiting for what Jesus has promised: *“And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49). They were waiting to begin the mission that Jesus had entrusted to them, when they would *“receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). The apostles knew that their mission was to continue Jesus’ work and to share his good news; but as they surveyed the crowds in Jerusalem speaking a vast array of languages, they may have wondered how they would be able to share this message of life and salvation so that everyone could hear and understand in their own languages.

Their time of waiting and wondering comes to an end when they receive what Jesus had promised: the gift of the Holy Spirit. The arrival of the Holy Spirit is compared to the sound wind makes and to the flames fire produces (*“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.” – Acts 2:2-3), images that are drawn from important events in the Old Testament:

- “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” – Genesis 1:1-2.
- “There an angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” – Exodus 3:2.
- “... you made the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.” – Psalm 104:4.

Through these well-known biblical images, Luke creates “*a vivid impression of the Spirit’s presence among the community of the Lord’s disciples as a distinguishing mark.*” (Wall).

The result of the arrival of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise of empowerment so that the apostles are able to begin the mission Jesus has entrusted to them: “*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, and the Spirit gave them ability.*” (2:4). Jesus’ promised gift of the Holy Spirit gives the Galilean apostles the ability to speak in the native languages of the “*devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem*” (2:5) – in effect, the entire household of Israel, including “*both Jews and proselytes*” (2:10), converts to Judaism, is present to hear the inspired witness to God’s faithfulness to Israel. The initial response of the crowd is varied; Luke reports that they are “*bewildered, amazed, astonished, and perplexed.*” Hearing people speaking their native languages with distinct Galilean accents leads them to wonder how “*in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.*” (2:11). Some even go as far as to mock what is happening as a scene caused by people who are “*filled with new wine.*” (2:13).

- “*Backwoods Galileans speaking foreign languages attract attention among the other Jews in Jerusalem – both residents and pilgrims celebrating the Feast of Weeks. Capturing attention is one thing; making sense is another. The cosmopolitan crowd expresses curiosity and scorn. They clamor for an explanation, for meaning.*” – Matt Skinner.

The curiosity, confusion, and scorn of the crowds leads Peter to interpret what they have witnessed. Peter serves as a spokesperson for all the apostles: “*standing with the eleven, [he] raised his voice and addressed them*” (2:14). Peter’s sermon is a “*Spirit-empowered witness to the risen Jesus, a means by which God’s purposes are realized*” (Wall). Peter’s Pentecost sermon is in the form of a Jewish *midrash*, a commentary on Scripture. Peter begins by explaining that what the household of Israel has experienced is the fulfillment of what was prophesied by the prophet Joel as the outpouring of the Spirit that inaugurates the last days when “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” (2:21).

Peter chooses the words of the prophet from Joel 2:28-32 as a means of answering the crowd’s yearning for an explanation of what they have experienced as well as for offering a pattern for the church’s mission that will be accomplished throughout the book of Acts. In its original context, this passage follows a prophecy comparing the coming of the day of the Lord (*yom Yahweh*) to that of a devastating army (“*The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless are those who obey his command. Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed – who can endure it?*” – Joel 2:11). The prophet declares fasting and repentance as the people’s appropriate response to the fearful coming of the wrath of the day of the LORD (“*Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing*” – 2:12-13). The result

is both a near reprieve – the removal of the enemy army – and the promise of hope through the pouring out of God’s spirit (*“Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.”* – 2:28). Peter uses this last section as a means of interpreting what the people of Jerusalem have experienced in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples:

- *“As in the days of Joel, the portents of God’s inbreaking are terrifying – blood, smoke, fire, and a solar eclipse. However, God’s coming also brings people to prophetic speech, women and men, slave and free. And all who call on God’s name will be saved.”* -Margaret Aymer.

God’s Spirit is poured out upon the community’s entire membership in order to prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams; sons and daughters shall prophesy, and both young and old men will pray a role in the fulfillment of God’s prophetic promises. Even those in the lowliest of positions in society, *“slaves, both men and women,”* will utter prophetic words through the empowerment of the Spirit. All this will take place in the *“last days,”* which means that these are no longer days of waiting but days set apart for mission, for giving witness to the risen Christ.

- *“Peter does not speak of prophecy as predicting the future. Instead, prophecy is truth-telling. It is naming the places and ways where God intervenes or initiates in the world. It is a component of proclaiming the word of God and identifying God’s salvation at work.”* – Skinner.

Following this passage from Joel, the shape of the church’s witness includes two primary tasks: the mediation of God’s *“wonders and signs”* (*“portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.”* – 2:19; Joel 2:30); and the proclamation of God’s Word that *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (2:21; Joel 2:32). *“Without this prophetic witness, the ministry of the church is corrupted by self-interest and its presence in the world ceases to matter.”* (Wall). The day of Pentecost is often considered to be the birth of the Church and its mission to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ *“to the ends of the earth.”* It is a Spirit-empowered witness that is not a one-time occurrence but continues through the book of Acts as a *“sequence of occasions in which the Spirit mobilizes Jesus’ followers and inaugurates new directions for ministry and community”* (Skinner).

- *“When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.”* – 4:31.
- *“The Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”* – 8:17.
- *“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”* – 13:2-3.

It is through the presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit that individuals are incorporated through Holy Baptism into the Church which is the Body of Christ. When we are reborn through water and the Word, we are *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever”* and sustained with the gift of the Holy Spirit: *“the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence both now and forever.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). It is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that God has *“called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.”* (Small Catechism). It is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that God empowers us as God’s holy

people to *“accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine [so that] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”* (Ephesians 3:20-21).

- *“The Body of Christ is the spiritual temple built out of living stones. Christ is its sole foundation and cornerstone, but at the same time he is in his Person the temple, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, replenishing and sanctifying the hearts of the faithful. The temple of God is the holy people in Jesus Christ. The Body of Christ is the living temple of God and of the new humanity.”* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

There is one element of the Pentecost story that is of particular significance for us as we gather in this place for worship. During their ten days of waiting between Ascension and Pentecost, the apostles were gathered indoors: *“When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying”* (Acts 1:13). But on the day of Pentecost, *“they were all together in one place”* (2:1) – only this time they were outdoors, so that when they were filled with the Holy Spirit the message they proclaimed about *“God’s deeds of power”* could be heard by all. While we are blessed with a beautiful sanctuary in which we gather for worship, on this day we are reminded that the mission of the church is to go beyond its walls, to go out of its doors, and to go into the world to proclaim *“the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). As the words we proclaim in this park this morning may extend beyond our gathering, may we continue to go out and reach out in the power of the Spirit, *“that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”* (Romans 8:16-17).

- *“The knowledge that we are children of God – and that we may fully be assured of it – is not derived from ourselves or from the law. It is the witness of the Holy Spirit who bears witness to it, against the law and the feeling of our own unworthiness, and in spite of our weakness he makes us fully assured of it. Such witness is accomplished in such a way that we are made fully aware of it and feel the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us through the Word, and our experience agrees with the Word or the message ... Those who with firm faith and hope are confident that they are children of God are children of God, for no one can have such confidence except through the Holy Spirit.”* – Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans.

I’m not sure how a message could be effectively communicated to the diverse crowds that come to Niagara Falls; it is a task that is probably beyond human ability, as was the task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to the vast array of people in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Even though we are called to continue the apostolic witness of the Gospel, we cannot accomplish such an overwhelming task by ourselves; but through the power of the Holy Spirit, our assembly – be it indoors or outdoors – will be the place where all people *“in our own languages”* will hear the good news that in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, all of us are children of God. Amen.