

May 23, 2021
Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“In Our Native Tongues”

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

While I wait for the opportunity to see *Come from Away* on stage, I watched a documentary on the remarkable story of the hospitality of the people of Gander, Newfoundland when thousands of airline passengers suddenly landed in their international airport in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The people of Gander had no advance warning about the arrival of these frightened and bewildered people, many of whom could not even find Newfoundland on a map; but their innate hospitality resulted in their quickly organizing meals and places to stay for strangers who immediately became their guests. The musical celebrates this incredible story of the people of a small town who responded to a tragic event with caring and compassion that serves as an example of how people can truly embody Jesus’ commandment to *“love one another as I have loved you.”*

One story in the documentary that caught my attention was that of a small church in Gander that took in a group of passengers from the former Soviet Union. One of the first challenges for this congregation was communicating with their guests, who only spoke Russian. Since there were no Russian speakers in Gander, the pastor was stumped as to how he might help these scared people in this most unique situation. As he was helping them settle into the church building, he noticed that several of the guests had Russian Bibles; since the numbering system in Bibles is similar no matter the language, he invited his guests to read Philippians 4:6: *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* When the guests read those words in their native languages, the pastor noticed for the first time that there were smiles on their faces, and it was through the Word of God in the native language of all the people in that church that they were able to communicate with one another and live in the blessing of God’s presence in this most challenging of circumstances.

As it was through reading the Word of God in their native language that the people who suddenly found themselves in a strange land knew that God’s blessings were with them, so was it through their ability to hear God’s Word in language they could understand that the people who were gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost able to be blessed by the proclamation of God’s Word when the disciples were *“filled*

with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:4). The reception of God’s Spirit on this day *“enables the community to carry an inspired word about God’s risen Messiah to the entire household of Israel.”* (Robert W. Wall).

The day of Pentecost marked the end of the disciples’ period of waiting in obedience to Jesus’ promise and command in the moments before his ascension that *“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). Following Jesus’ ascension into heaven forty days after his resurrection, these disciples *“returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away ... All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers”* (Acts 1:12-14). Their period of faithful waiting lasted ten days, culminating on the day of Pentecost (“fiftieth day”), a day in which Diaspora Jews returned to Jerusalem for a day-long harvest festival more commonly known as the “Feast of Weeks” (*Shavuot*) and scheduled fifty days following Passover, in accordance with the teachings of the Torah:

- *“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 ... On that same day you shall make proclamation; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a statute for ever in all your settlements throughout your generations.”* – Leviticus 23:15-16, 21.

Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage feasts when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God toward the nation; this explains why *“there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem”* (2:5), the list of nations which challenges lectors who are assigned this reading on the day of Pentecost. In addition to being a harvest celebration, Pentecost was a commemoration of God’s giving of the covenant and law on Mt. Sinai (*“Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes.”* – Deuteronomy 16:12).

It is on this day of Pentecost that Jesus’ promise is fulfilled, and the disciples’ time of waiting is finished; *“the Spirit arrives in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost as the fulfillment of prophecy and as the answer to the community’s expectant prayers; it*

is a clear sign of God's faithfulness." (Wall). While Jesus' followers (a group much larger than the Twelve) were together in one place, "*suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.*" (2:2). The word "spirit" comes from the Greek word *pneuma*, similar to the Hebrew *ru'ah* which can be translated as "wind" and is used to describe God's creative and inspiring breath in creation and in the inspiration of leaders and prophets:

- "... then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." – Genesis 2:7.
- "So the LORD said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him.'" – Numbers 27:18.
- "And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me." – Ezekiel 2:2.

Luke uses other familiar Old Testament symbols of theophany, similar to Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai, to describe the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost ("*Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently*" – Exodus 19:18). It is through "*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*" that the disciple community is "*filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*" (2:3-4). Having received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are now empowered to fulfill Jesus' commission to "*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (1:8).

The crowd of "*devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem*" initially respond with bewilderment, "*because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each*" (2:6). What was even more perplexing was that the source is Galileans – people who were notorious for their lack of linguistic talent – speaking in their native languages. While many were "*amazed and perplexed*" as "*in their own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power,*" others scoffed as they write off the importance of what they have heard as a case of inebriation: "*They are filled with new wine.*" (2:11-13). But there is irony in their mockery; in the Old Testament, new wine symbolized the joy and abundant blessings that God would give God's people in the messianic age ("*On that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water*" – Joel 3:18). Jesus hinted that he himself would give the "new wine" of

divine life (*“No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst its skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins”* – Mark 2:22). The new wine symbolizes *“God’s love [that] has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (Romans 5:5).

In response to these derisive responses to the apostles’ proclamation, Peter stands up and speaks on behalf of Jesus’ followers, quoting the words of the prophet Joel to prove that the outpouring of the Spirit is the inaugural event of Israel’s “last days” during which *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (2:21). Peter’s sermon is *“a Spirit-empowered witness to the risen Jesus, the means by which God’s purposes are realized ... Persuasive preaching is not a matter of being ‘filled with new wine’ but being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’”* (Wall). The people’s ignorance about the coming of the Messiah which provoked their derision rather than confession will be reversed only when they *“listen to what I have to say”* (2:14). “Listen” literally means “let me place it (the Word of God) into your ears,” as Moses instructed the people of Israel after leading them through the waters of the Red Sea:

- *“If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD who heals you.”* – Exodus 15:26.

Peter’s statement that the apostles *“are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning”* (2:15) may refer to a belief in the popular culture of the time that this hour was inhabited only by those who intended no good. Instead, Peter points to their Spirit-inspired proclamation in the native languages to *“all who live in Jerusalem”* as the fulfillment of the word of God proclaimed by the prophet Joel, that *“in the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”* (2:17; Joel 2:28). Peter’s sermon is a Jewish *midrash* (commentary) on Scripture; the apostle interprets Joel in declaring that Pentecost initiates Israel into a new epoch – “the last days” – of God’s salvation history, when things said and done by Jesus’ successors take an added urgency. Events that fulfill biblical prophecy are God’s script of salvation; Pentecost is the inauguration of a prophetic moment of empowered and illuminated proclamation when *“even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.”* (2:18). The “signs and wonders” of which the prophet spoke mark the presence and progress of the Spirit who prepares

the way for the Church's missionary work, "*before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day*" (2:20), the time of empowered witness and God's salvation when "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" (2:21). The Spirit-empowered proclamation of God's Word in the languages of all people is a sign that the good news of Jesus Christ is a message that is to be shared with all people, for Jesus Christ is Lord not only of his people but of all people. It was a message that was accepted by many in that diverse Pentecost crowd: "*those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added*" (2:41). It was a message that grew among both Hebrew and Greek speaking Jews to the point where deacons were anointed to care for the needs of the growing faith community, in which "*the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*" (6:7). It was a word of welcome and acceptance that Philip shared with an Ethiopian whose physical condition excluded him from coming into God's presence in the Temple; as they shared the word of the prophet Isaiah, the Ethiopian pointed to a pool of water and asked the apostle, "*Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" (8:36); upon being baptized, this new child of God "*went on his way rejoicing*" (8:39). The apostle Peter, whose Pentecost sermon was the inaugural event of the Church's mission of being witnesses "*to the ends of the earth*" (1:8) discovers how inclusive this message is when he is invited to the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius and declares that "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him ... All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" (10:34-35, 43). The apostles are inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in all languages so that all might hear and come to believe the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord of *all* people:

- "So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God." – Ephesians 2:17-22.

One of the most important legacies of the Reformation was Luther's translation of the Bible into the language of his people so that the mission of Pentecost might continue

as they were able to hear in their own tongues the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. Luther believed that "*the true Christian church is the work of the Word communicated by every available means. Luther sensed the need for a new translation of the Scriptures from the original tongues into idiomatic German*" (Roland Bainton). People were able to hear the Word of God preached in their own languages so that they would know that God's love is for all people, that the Word of the Lord is meant to be for all people "*a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*" (Psalm 119:105).

While the celebration of Pentecost has not entered popular culture as have our observances of Christmas and Easter, it is an important day for the Church of Christ in every generation, a reminder that from the beginning God's people were called and empowered to share the love of God with everyone, a message we teach in the classic children's song that "*Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world.*" We are called to share this good news by every means, in every language, in every context and to people in all circumstances. Even during these times of separation and restriction, we have found ways to share this message through livestreaming, Zoom, YouTube, and means of sharing the message of Jesus Christ with people wherever they may be, so that in their own places, languages, and life situations they may know that God's Word and God's love abides with us always.

- "Pentecost is many things – fire, wind, ecstasy, and renewal – but more than all that it is the Spirit whose gift is that of understanding, of knowing who and whose we are. We celebrate today once again that gift to them and to us, and we pray that what transformed them may transform us, and with us the world for God and Christ." – Peter Gomes.

The Word of God in their language gave the frightened Russian passengers who found themselves in a strange land the comfort of knowing that God was with them and gave their hosts in Gander a means of continue to uphold them with God's blessed hope. God continues to empower and inspire us to share this word in all languages and in all means so that all people may know that the Word of God is a word of good news for all people who are *God's* people.

Amen.