

“To Translate”

Rev. Berry French; Sermon on Acts 2:1-21

6/8/14 Pentecost at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church

Scripture Text

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**, 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. **All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“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.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Sermon

I love living in Black Mountain. I just love it. I love our little town. And in the summer time, I think I love it even more ... there's more daylight and better weather to get out into these beautiful mountains. But the summer means it becomes less of our little town as all these visitors from all over come to also enjoy these mountains.

I'll tell you something else I love about living in Black Mountain. I love the Lake Eden Arts Festival. I know not everyone does, but I love LEAF festival. All these folks come in from all over the country and from places around the world and crowd into the beautiful valley behind Owen High School at Camp Rockmont. Katie and Aubry and I have been to almost every LEAF festival since we've lived here.

If you haven't been yet, you should check it out – it's a sight to see. Hundreds, probably thousands, of folks move into our little town for the weekend once in the fall and once in the spring to enjoy the merriment of a music and art festival. There are literally people here from all over the world and it's a joyous occasion of celebrating life and music and the arts.

In the ancient world, Jerusalem was the city for festivals. They had a LOT of festivals. One of the biggest festivals in 1st century Jerusalem was the Festival of Weeks, when our Jewish ancestors remembered and celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

There were three major festivals in the Jewish tradition that required all able-bodied Jewish males to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. The Festival of the Weeks was one of them. It was called the Festival of the Weeks because it started exactly 49 days after the Festival of the Passover. It was a full week of weeks, or seven weeks – 49 days, after Passover. It is also called Pentecost because it's 50 days from Passover – “Pente” is Greek for 50. Passover was the Jewish festival that had Jerusalem abuzz with visitors from all over when Jesus entered on a donkey on Palm Sunday.

So all that background of Jerusalem **filled with people** and filled with **festival excitement** is implied with the opening words of the second chapter of Acts: *When the Day of Pentecost had come.*

Think to yourself – it's the Saturday of LEAF festival and there is traffic out on old 70, cars are packed into Owen Middle School, and folks are in town from all over. There are tents as far as you can see on every inch of Rockmont property. **There is an excitement in the air**, and everyone is on **vacation!**

Or if LEAF isn't your festival of choice, the Sourwood Festival downtown Black Mountain might let your imagination get started on the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem on that particular Festival Day centuries ago, with people from all over the world, people who came from various backgrounds and brought a variety of cultural identities with them.

And Leviticus and Deuteronomy make it clear that all daily work must be set aside on festival days. And everyone, EVERYONE was invited to the festival: "You, your sons and daughters, your men servants and maid servants, the Levites in your towns, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you." The law made it clear that festivals had a guest list that included all of God's people.¹

It's helpful to know what the author of Acts meant, and what the early church heard with "the Day of Pentecost had come." Those opening remarks set the scene in a way that is lost on our modern ears. The other sentiment that was in the air on that first Christian Pentecost was this waiting ... For our Jewish ancestors there was anticipation and preparation for the Festival of Weeks. Much like we do with our Advent Wreaths preparing for Christmas, or our Lenten devotions preparing for Easter, ancient Jews had a practice of counting the 49 days between Passover and The Festival of Weeks.

But particularly for those early disciples gathered in that house, they had been waiting ... and waiting, and not exactly sure what they were waiting on. For you see these disciples had been living through some chaos in the last few months ... they had been following Jesus and watching him heal people and listening to his teachings, and expecting him to fulfill their ideas of Messiah. And then when they have finally made it to Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, somehow it all went wrong and Jesus was crucified and then buried.

A few days later, they received reports that he was raised from the dead, then they saw him and they experienced the Risen Jesus. And the whirlwind continues for those disciples. The opening chapter of Acts tells us the Risen Jesus tells them to stay in Jerusalem ... and wait, WAIT for God's promised Holy Spirit.

And so these disciples who had their hearts broken on Good Friday, now back together with Jesus on the other side of death, ask him ... "Lord, **is this when** you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" They basically ask : "OK, NOW are you going to be the Messiah that we expected and that we want ... are you going to bring us and bring Israel into power?"

And the Risen Jesus replies, just before he is taken back up into heaven: “You will **receive power when the Holy Spirit comes** upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then Jesus is taken up, out of their sight.

And they are all trying to figure out what in the world Jesus is talking about and what just happened. But despite the chaos, they all agree that Jesus was clear that they should **stay right there in Jerusalem and wait** ... even if they don’t know what exactly they are waiting for.

So we come into the story as the early Christians are in Jerusalem, waiting; scared of what might come, remembering what happen last time the city was overflowing with a crowd ... remembering how it somehow turned ugly between Palm Sunday and the end of that week ... but they are faithfully waiting for the promised Holy Spirit.

Suddenly an eruption of SOUND like a tornado filled the entire house; and then there was fire, and then somehow tongues of fire falling and reaching and touching everyone in the room ... and they were all, every single one of those 120 folksⁱⁱ was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now as you may know, **encounters with the Holy Spirit are sometime hard to put into words**. If you’ve ever tried to describe your own encounters with the Devine or your own powerful religious experiences to someone else – you know it’s hard to put words around the experience.

Luke, the author of Acts, does the best he can – and he actually does a better job in the original Greek than the English translations give him credit for. He talks about a wind – the sound of a mighty wind. In the original Greek, as is also the case for ancient Hebrew, the word for Wind is the same word that is used for Spirit, and also for breath. Genesis talks about a wind/spirit/breath hovering over the primordial waters, and Genesis also talks about God breathing God’s breath/Spirit/wind into the newly formed humanity to give us life.

So when Luke talks about a Wind/Spirit/Breath ... the original audience likely heard a reference to God’s Spirit, God’s Breath/Wind of Creation once again **bringing something to life**.ⁱⁱⁱ And Luke talks of fire, tongues of fire. To those early Christians the fire is reminiscent of God’s powerful presence in the burning bush in Moses’ call story, and pillar of fire the Israelites followed through the Exodus journey. And these tongues of fire – the Greek work we faithfully translate “tongues” actually links more closely to the speaking of languages than our English word tongue can suggest.

Luke is doing the best he can to describe what happened – it was a powerful thing that happened and Luke has to lean into poetry to try to convey it. Just as the house was FILLED with the sound of the wind/Spirit, everyone there was FILLED with the Holy Spirit.

They have waited prayerfully and patiently and all of the sudden it explodes. The Holy Spirit is poured out on those gathered, and the church has never been the same. The Spirit fills the room and fills those timid disciples with a gift of the language.

And they are able to SPEAK – they found the words to say and the courage to speak and the boldness to proclaim God’s good news. They leave that silent room of waiting and they rush out into those busy streets and markets and they talk about God’s deeds of power ... and they do it in the languages of all those they encounter.

All those people who have gathered for the festival from all over – they all hear their own native tongue being spoken by these back-woods Galileans who used to be simple fishermen up on the Sea of Galilee. Everyone around those Pentecost disciples gathered to hear about God’s love in **a language that spoke directly to them.** They heard about God’s story in **ways that captivated them** and **spoke directly to who they were** and where they had come from.

It seems to me that what those early disciples did through the power of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost has been the work of the church since then ... **to translate** the Good news into languages that **meet people right where they are.** I believe that is the work of the Church – to tell God’s story, but to tell the story in a way that makes sense to the people we’re talking to.

For those early Christians living in the first century, they had to figure out how to tell the story in ways that made sense to Gentiles, who did not have the Jewish heritage and stories that Jesus’ original Jewish disciples had. Those early disciples had to follow the Spirit to talk about Jesus and God in ways that didn’t rely on a Jewish background.

Our Presbyterian Missionaries of the previous century followed the Holy Spirit and told of God’s love and told Jesus’ story of teaching and healing and caring by building school and hospitals, by providing clean water and orphanages. God’s story in Jesus was told by Presbyterian missionaries who took the time **to learn the language, to study the culture, to build relationships,** and then tell God’s story through creating nursing schools to provide staff for the medical clinics and forming seminaries to train pastors for the new Christian communities the Holy Spirit was creating. They followed the Spirit

and translated God's good news into cultures in ways that **met people where they were** and provided tangible expressions of Jesus as teacher, healer, and preacher.

And it seems to me that today, more than ever, our work is to follow the Holy Spirit and **explore ways to tell and to translate the good news**. For friends, the world desperately needs to hear of God's love, and the old ways of telling the story don't seem to be hitting home in the same way they did 10, 15, 25 years ago.

Brothers and Sisters, I am convinced the Christian church has a Powerful, Life-giving, Hopeful message. It's the same message we have always had to share, but we have to follow the Spirit to try and discover new ways of translating the story. We have to LISTEN to the Spirit – as God's Spirit comes to us by way of Wind, or Fire, by way of listening to our global Christian brothers and sisters, by trying something even if we think it might fail, or by however God's Spirit comes to us.

The story of Pentecost invites us to explore new **methods of talking about God**, new **ways of speaking** about God's love for us, and **new approaches to translating God's** desire to be in relationship with us. For it is our work to **personalize the story of God's love** so that all those around us can **hear it and grasp it**.

For friends, we have a powerful story to tell. We have a Word to speak into the brokenness of the world, a Word of good news and hope that is unlike any other word.^{iv} For we know the God who **created all things** and who **sustains all life** and who **loves all people**.

Friends, we have a Word from God to speak, to translate, **to personalize to each person we encounter**: that life is stronger than death, that hope is deeper than despair,^v that there is **nothing we can do to separate ourselves from God's love**. That Word, that Good news, is our gift to translate and personalize.

[prayer]

O God, make us messengers of your Good News. Remind us that we have something to say. Give us the gift of your Holy Spirit so that we can translate your Word and your love in such a way that brings hope in the face of despair, faith in the face of cynicism, and life in the face of death. Amen.

ⁱ Rev. Grace Imathiu, United Methodist Church Minister in a sermon: "The Day Heaven Burst Open" on Day1.org

ⁱⁱ Acts 1:15 tells us there were about 120 people gathered.

ⁱⁱⁱ Will Willimon, Interpretation: Acts. 1998. Page 30.

^{iv} Tom Long, from a sermon titled "What Is the Gift?" found at Day1.org

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