

A Language of Love
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Pentecost
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Acts 2:1-21

Seven years ago, I joined a consortium of Wake Forest students on an interfaith pilgrimage to Israel. One morning, we visited Mount Arbel National Park near the city of Tiberias. The peak of Mount Arbel rises some 380 meters from its base, providing panoramic views of the Sea of Galilee and the Golan Heights. It's a breathtaking setting. It gives you the same kind of feeling as standing on the Blowing Rock or crossing the wooden bridge on Grandfather Mountain. And as you look out, you see the footprint of Jesus' geographical ministry. Natural, religious, and cultural history all converge in one single place.

And on this balmy January morning, our little group decided to read the Psalms. Chris, a fellow divinity school student, read one of his favorites. Hannah, a Jewish student, read a morning cedar. Muhammad, a Muslim student, picked a favorite passage from the Quran. We spoke in different languages, but we were of one accord. And we heard and understood one another, each in our own native tongue. And we saw each other, each in the reflection of our own generous, compassionate, and peaceful God.

Muhammad neared the end of his reading, a rhythmic cadence, half-speech, half song, a mysterious and meaningful melody. And suddenly, without warning, there came from the skies a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and the earth shook, and there was fire, too. But this wasn't the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy. It was manmade: a sleek fighter jet pierced the winds, its orange and red flames licking a cloudless blue sky.

Muhammad read facing our little circle, his back turned to both the view of the sea, and of the jet. And it seemed so strange. He read as if nothing was happening behind him. We saw his lips moving, but the words were drowned out. And we were confronted with two simultaneous images: a majestic landscape, and flashing streak of silver and grey. And the world just seemed to stop.

Years later, I think this scene paints the perfect picture of two opposing forces. On a mountaintop, a dozen pilgrims hoping and praying and seeking to make manifest, even if only for a moment, the kind of world that can be. And a fighter jet, the most tangible instrument of power and force, bent of keeping the world just as it is.

And I think this illustration demonstrates the struggle of humanity. Every day, regardless of time or era, we are offered glimpses of what the world can be, and of what our Creator intends for each of us to be. And every day, we are also force-fed solemn reminders of how the world is, and of how the tyrannies of men are working to keep it so.

And today's lectionary readings paint two such pictures.

In Genesis, after the great flood subsides, God commands the children of Noah to be fruitful and multiply. "Go and fill all the corners of the earth, and create a diverse and wonderful world," God says. God intends the world to be a place of rich diversity.

Humanity has other plans. The world's population begins to swell, but we're told there is still only one language. And Noah's clan is ambitious. United by one language and a spirit of cooperation, they say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth." God is none too happy about this blueprint, and confuses the languages of earth. God makes it so that folks cannot understand nor be understood by one another. The Tower of Babel is abandoned, new languages are born, and the people of the world scatter to all the points of the earth.

The tower collapses because it's a project that defies the intentions of its creator. God created the world to be a place of human diversity – a place where talents and tongues and cultures complemented one another, and grew and filled the earth. Those folks at Babel wanted to bottle up humanity, wanted to create a fortress of solitude and protection, a place to be removed from the world, and feared by It, too. Babel was not what God intended, so down it came.

And don't be fooled into thinking that the Tower of Babel is an ancient story. We need look no further than embassies in Jerusalem, walls along the Mexican border, and glimmering corporate skyscrapers in downtowns and uptowns to find our own towers of Babel, each with their own exclusive and abusive languages: antiquated and unenlightened theologies of chosen-ness; unempathetic and ignorant practices of racism and nationalism; and the ruthlessness of greed. These are NOT the languages of God. And these are NOT the building blocks of sustainable towers.

Now fast forward to Pentecost.

In the second chapter of Acts, we catch a glimpse of how and what the world is intended to be – a world that is led by the Holy Spirit, empowering folks of every make and model to be instruments of God's grace – to usher in the era of kin-dom-living.

Our scene begins with a holiday gathering. The twelve apostles, and another 120 associates of the early church have convened in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, one of the three annual festivals that required faithful Jews to visit the Jerusalem Temple. The feast occurred fifty days after Passover, and we know it as Pentecost. And just like our Easter and Christmas services, it was one of those rare occasions where the whole church body was gathered together in one place.

And all of a sudden, there comes a supernatural experience – God arrives in this place. God's arrival is too hard to explain in human terms – all we can do is liken it to the sound of a violent wind and the wildness of fiery flames. Just like all encounters with God – the scene is awesome in every sense of the word – it is scary and wonderful and incomprehensible and enlightening all at the same time. The Holy Spirit is set upon the people of the gathering, and they begin speaking in a variety of languages. They proclaim the gospel in a plethora of tongues with the ease of skilled translators. It is a symphony of human expression.

Remember that Jews from all over the world are in the city, and hearing all the commotion, they make their way to the apostles to see what's happening. The crowd of bystanders is amazed at what they see and hear. Each listener is able to understand what is being said in their own native language. The gospel is being transmitted simultaneously to an audience of diverse people, and each of these people is receiving a customized experience. This is not the broadcast of one universal language, but of all languages.

Remember also the setting. We're in an occupied Roman territory. Everyone in Palestine would have spoken Aramaic or Greek, two languages that would streamline communication, and allow cultures to be assimilated. In addition, a bunch of uneducated, uncultured fishermen from a little Podunk region called the Galilee, are all of a sudden speaking complicated languages with ease. "What is going on?" the crowd asks. How are people who can barely speak one language (can't you hear that Galilean twang, y'all?) proclaiming all of God's deeds and wonders with such eloquence? Some are amazed. They wonder what this all means. Others are more skeptical – "Man those folks are sauced! They must be drinking some strong wine!"

Enter Peter. With the other disciples around him, he clears his throat: "Everybody listen up. Lemme tell you what to make of all this!"

"Stop and think for two seconds. These people aren't sauced. It's nine o'clock in the morning and it's not even tailgating season. No friends, you are in the midst of something really special. Don't you remember the prophet Joel? Remember what he said? Well it's all coming to fruition."

Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel translates Peter's recitation of Joel's prophecy as follows:

When the time is ripe, says God, I will shed my spirit on all humankind. And your sons and your daughters will speak truthfully. Your young people will come up with starry ideas, and your old people will have radical suggestions. Yes indeed, when the time is ripe, I will shed my spirit on my boys and my girls and they will speak the truth.

Peter is telling the crowd that this is the beginning of a new age – an age empowered by the Holy Spirit. Starting today, God's gonna get about the business of restoring the world to its intended purpose. The time is ripe for the church to begin its harvest.

It's a world where simple Galileans, empowered by the Holy Spirit, become great communicators. It's a world where great cities like Jerusalem will no longer need to build walls and towers that keep diversity out. Instead, the Holy Spirit will empower communities to find the sacred in the unique makeup of all peoples. It's a world where God's intentions for creation will trump Rome's selfish desires. Pentecost is the start of the Spirit-filled age. Peter says, "Friends, God has given us the signal. Let's get to work!"

A few chapters later in Acts, we learn that the events of Pentecost inspired an idyllic early community – a place where the whole group of *those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them.*

For a fleeting moment, the church was as God intended it to be.

And don't you go thinking, not for one minute, that this is a whimsical account, something of little importance for our modern, progressive, intellectual minds. Pentecost still happens every day. When we share our bread, we speak a common language. And when we shed tears together, and laugh together, and hope together, we speak a common language. When we care for our earth; when we love our neighbors; when we teach our children the stories of a compassionate and inclusive God, we speak a common language.

Yes, even after the original day of Pentecost, Rome still shook its mighty fists, and sought to impose its will. And yes, even after this morning, Rome will do the same: there will still be jets flying over Gaza, and guns wreaking havoc in Texas schools, and hate-speech blaring in New York delicatessens. But such actions cannot mute the spirit of God, nor the resolve of pilgrims to seek such a spirit.

Every spirit-filled act of kindness and cooperation is a reverberation of those original Pentecost winds. And each act slowly but surely chips away at the foundations of babbling towers, and beckons us closer to a world where's God's children live into God's purpose.

And here, I think, is today's challenge, Sardis Baptist Church. Despite the jets that seek to blind our sight and deafen our hearing, we have a new world to envision, and help bring about. Such a world will only come about when we begin to speak God's language, a language constructed one syllable of love at a time.

But take heart, we have new winds in our sails – the spirit of God. And that spirit empowers us to speak with truth and act with love. And sooner or later, streaking jets will no longer be able to compete with scenic vistas. Matter of fact, streaking jets will no longer need to be part of our language.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.