

“Good News in Any Language”

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Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘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.

- 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
- 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
- 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
- 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

WAITING ON THE SPIRIT

The risen Christ appeared to his disciples for forty days after the crucifixion.
Then the disciples saw him ascend into heaven.

But, before he ascended he told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the
coming of the Holy Spirit.

So, disciples gathered in Jerusalem.
And they waited.

I think about those scientists in Hawaii waiting for the eruption of the vol-
cano.

Half afraid and half excited.
Waiting for something that very few have seen before.

I wonder if that's what it felt like?

They knew something big was about to happen.
John the Baptist baptized with water, but he said that the Messiah, he
would baptize with fire.

They were waiting for fire.
They just didn't know when it would happen.
And they weren't quite sure what it would be like.
WIND AND FIRE

Well, on Pentecost it happened.
Suddenly, without warning the wind began to blow.

But, not just any wind.
This was an eternal wind.

I like the way our last hymn puts it,
“Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow”.
This was the wind of new creation.

And the wind filled the house.

But, that was just the beginning.
The wind of new creation was followed by fire.
Tongues of fire rested on each disciple.
And they were filled with this fiery Holy Spirit.

There were people in Jerusalem from all over the ancient world to celebrate Pentecost,
and apparently the sound of the rushing wind,
the wind that makes all winds that blow,
brought them to the house where the disciple were staying.

And the Spirit gave the disciples a gift.
They were able to speak in “other languages”.
I assume that means languages other than the one they already knew.

SPEAKING A NEW LANGUAGE

In that regard, I’m jealous.
Have you ever tried to really learn a foreign language?
Some of you here today can speak more than one language.
I salute you for that.

I haven’t had much luck at learning modern spoken languages
After years of work I just can’t bridge the gap.
My mind only wants to speak English...and southern English at that!

Most of us are like this.
Studies that suggest that most of us can be proficient in a spoken language
only if we start trying to learn at a very early age.

Our brains are more pliable then.

But as we get older,

we tend to think in only one way.

Speaking a new language can be a very hard thing to do, if not impossible.

And yet, the disciples were able to speak a new language in the blink of an eye.

That was the miracle of Pentecost.

Galileans had a distinctive way of speaking.

I sometimes wonder if it might have been the ancient equivalent of my mountain brogue.

But, now these Galileans from the country began to speak with a foreign accent.

And people from all over the ancient world were able to hear and understand in their own language.

We talk about something being “lost in translation”.

Quite often, even if we understand another language, what we say is misunderstood or mistranslated.

I have a family member who’s first language is Spanish.

And from time to time he is perplexed by our idioms.

I try to explain,
but sometimes it’s sort of amusing.

I have to admit.

What we say often doesn’t make much sense when you take it literally.

But, not only did these Galilean disciples speak another language;
they were able to speak about God’s deeds of power
just like this foreign language was their own.

BEWILDERED

I have a friend from North Carolina who spent some time as a missionary in Taiwan.

One day he took me to a Chinese Restaurant
and ordered our meal in the server’s native tongue.

The waiter looked absolutely flabbergasted.
Who would think that a guy with a southern accent from North Carolina
could speak his language?

He didn't know what to say.

I think this is how the crowd felt at Pentecost.

They were absolutely "bewildered".
And these "amazed and perplexed" people asked,
"What does it mean?"

I watched one of those "aliens visit the earth" movies this past week.

I usually hate the endings of those movies because they always seem con-
trived.

But, I love how those movies begin,
with more questions than answers.

Who are these guys?
Why are they here?
What are their intentions?

I love to put myself in the shoes of those encountering alien life,
and try to imagine what it would be like to be a part of such a world chang-
ing event.

When aliens visit the earth, things will never be the same.
And when the wind that makes all winds that blow comes down to earth,
things will never be the same either.

THE NEW WINE OF THE SPIRIT

But, for some, the questions give way to accusations.
Instead of asking, "What does this mean?"
some begin to say...with a sneer,

"These guys...they've have had too much new wine."

I'm not sure why they said that.

Maybe all those languages being spoken at once created confusion.
Or maybe the Spirit filled apostles were so infused with joy and hope...
that to the uninitiated, they appeared to be drunk.

Whatever the reason for this comment,
Peter felt compelled to address the crowd and offer an explanation.

He said,

“These guys can’t be drunk.
It’s only 9 o’clock in the morning.
The bars aren’t open yet!”

But, then he went on to tell them what was going on.
It was a fulfillment of prophecy.

According to Peter, the prophet Joel wrote about this amazing day long
ago.

In the last days, God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
The young will see visions.
The old will dream dreams.

Even slaves, the lowest rung on society’s ladder will prophesy.

In other words the coming of the Spirit will change society as we know it.
Think about how that might apply to our world today.

Women still struggle to be treated equally and with dignity. When the Spirit
comes, sons and daughters will prophesy.

They will proclaim a word of hope together.

The young often struggle to achieve the American dream while the old
sometimes feel abandoned and useless. When the Spirit comes young and
old alike will prophesy and dream dreams.

The Spirit will point both groups to a brighter future.

The poor struggle to survive while the rich get richer.

When the Spirit comes, those enslaved by vicious political and financial powers will be given a word of hope.

SIGNS OF A NEW CREATION

But, not only will society change.
The coming of the Spirit will change the rest of creation as well.
The heavens will proclaim the coming of the Spirit.

The sun shall refuse to shine.
The moon will be blood red.

Like those people who first heard the rushing wind and heard the miraculous message,
this apocalyptic description of the last days might make us say,

“So, what does this mean?
What is Joel talking about and how does it apply to the coming of the Spirit?”

I wonder if Peter might be thinking about the crucifixion, when the sun refused to shine
and all kinds of signs and wonders marked the death of Christ.

In the verses that follow our lesson for today Peter will go on to explain that Jesus was the Messiah. What he said and did attested to his power and authority.

But, he was rejected.
He was crucified by the people he loved.

And yet this did not defeat the power of God’s love.
His crucifixion and resurrection were a part of God’s plan to bring salvation to the world.

FORGIVENESS

But, before those who heard that first message could be saved,
they needed to admit their own role in killing the Messiah, God’s Son.

Peter told them quite frankly,
“This Lord and Messiah was Jesus,

the one that you crucified.”

The Bible tells us that this was a turning point.
The people were “cut to the heart”, and they cried out,

“What should we do?”

And Peter replied,

“Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away...”

I think this is a more detailed description of Joel’s prophesy in verse 21 of our lesson for today.

When the day of the Lord comes,
in the last days, when heaven comes down
and the Spirit of the Lord comes to recreate the world
...everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter knew what it meant to be far away and in need of repentance.

He had denied his Lord in the time of trial and had run away.
But, now he has become the chief spokesman for a new age of salvation.

That’s what happens when the Spirit of the Lord comes down.
Smoke, fire and new creations.

And so, in the power of the Spirit, Peter the fallen and restored disciple
makes an offer.
Repent and be baptized...not only with water, but also with the Holy Spirit.

And what happened?
A church of 120 became a megachurch of 3120.
3000 souls were added to the fellowship that day.

THE POWER OF SACRIFICIAL LOVE

The thing that brings us together
...the thing that makes it possible for people
from different languages and cultures to come together

... the thing that turns us from strangers and
even enemies
into brothers and sisters

sometimes

...is the promise of forgiveness
and God's eternal, sacrificial love.

Did you watch the royal wedding yesterday?
Pomp and circumstance doesn't begin to describe it.

I switched on the television when Bishop Michael Curry from the United States gave the sermon.

It was amusing to see the British trying to understand an American style preacher.
He spoke English but in a style to which they were not accustomed!

It seemed appropriate that the service was throughout a blend of two very cultures
After all, the royal couple comes from two very different worlds.

And yet, love brought them together.

But, not just this couple...
this love brought the British people
and people from all over the world together in a way that was truly touching.

It was about more than a royal wedding.
It was about the power of love.

Sensing this the Bishop in his sermon said some things that were not on his iPad.

(This gave some of the more buttoned down viewers a reason to gasp.
They said on Twitter, in language that I have cleaned up for purposes of a sermon,

"What a time to try out new material!")

Elton John and some of the other celebrities had a look that said,

"Has this guy had too much new wine?"

But, I think the Bishop was inspired.
In essence, he said that love, as demonstrated by the love of Christ is sacrificial.
And sacrificial love can change things, in a marriage and in the world.

Quoting Martin Luther King he said,

“We must discover the redemptive power of love.
And when we discover that,
we will be able to make this old world a new world.
Love is the only way.”

You see, in the final analysis the miracle of Pentecost was not speaking a foreign language without an accent.

The miracle of Pentecost was speaking the language of love,

God’s sacrificial love as revealed in Jesus.

This love was so strong that it brought people of different cultures together.
3,000 in one day.

And the miracle continues.
The sacrificial love of Christ still brings people together.

So, today, like those first disciples we are waiting for the Spirit.

The Spirit of understanding.
The Spirit of forgiveness.
The Spirit of love.

Quoting one of the last verses of the Bible,
“Come, Lord Jesus come.” (Revelation 22:20)

Amen.