

## *SPEAKING IN TONGUES*

Acts 2.1-21

Pentecost, May 24, 2015

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The Story (from Acts 2 in *The Message* with an introduction about Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks)

It was on Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, when all the disciples were together in one place that, without warning, there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force and no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

Because of the festival, there were many people staying in Jerusalem, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own languages being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They could not for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, “Aren’t these all Galileans? How come we’re hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?”

Parthians, Medes, Elamites;

Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia,

Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,

Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;

Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;

Even Cretans and Arabs!

“Each of us hears, in our own language, the wonderful works of God!”

Their heads were spinning; they couldn’t make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: “What’s going on here?” Others joked, “They’re drunk on cheap wine.”

That’s when Peter stood up and, backed by the eleven, spoke out with urgency: “Fellow Jews and all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren’t drunk as some of you suspect. They haven’t had time to get drunk – it’s only nine o’clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen; that in the coming days, God would pour out the Spirit on every kind of people – sons and daughters would prophesy, young people would see visions, and elders would dream dreams. The Spirit will fall on everyone.”

### The Sermon: *Speaking in Tongues*

The Pentecost story says that the Spirit fell on everyone. But I'm guessing that sometimes we are inclined to think that, in fact, the Spirit is more likely to fall on everyone *else* – we hope maybe on the preacher or the choir or your neighbor but probably not on you.

You may have noticed in this Pentecost story that, long before the preacher, Peter, stood up to preach, the Spirit had already spread through the crowd like wildfire and people were already speaking in other languages and hearing in their own. By the time Peter stands up to preach, he is basically explaining what has already happened.

So, before I say anything, I want to invite you to take a moment to open yourself to the movement of the Spirit. Michelle will play this through for us once and then we will sing together, “Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me.”

*Singing together ...*

Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me;  
Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me.  
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.  
Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me.

I love this old hymn but does it ever make you a little bit nervous to sing “Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on *me*?”

Perhaps I am wary because, when I was growing up in my conservative Baptist church, one of the greatest threats to biblical truth, we were told, was the manifestation of the Spirit other Christians called “speaking in tongues.”

I thought it fascinating that my teachers, who were otherwise committed to a literal reading of the Bible, would read Paul's admonition in I Corinthians 14 “not to forbid speaking in tongues” and promptly forbid it because, they said, it was for another time.

I noticed that it was the same kind of logic they used on Jesus' words to the rich young ruler in Mark 10 that to inherit eternal life he should sell all his possessions and goods and give the money to the poor. That message wasn't for today either.

The literal approach to the Bible was fine, apparently, unless we were talking about caring for the poor or speaking in tongues.

And all of this, of course, just made me more curious. What were we missing, I wondered, by *not* speaking in tongues?

One of the things I was told was that the practice of allowing time for this free-for-all of expression in worship – this cacophony of sounds -- was confusing and a distraction from the one clear message already found in the Bible which, of course, was up to the pastor to tell us in the sermon.

So what we were missing by *not* speaking in tongues, it sounded to me, was the possibility of recognizing that God speaks a lot of languages and through a lot of different experiences and through all kinds of people.

And the practice of speaking in tongues itself, I was told, was nothing more than a hyper-emotional state expressed in a kind of ecstatic speech.

So what we were missing by *not* speaking in tongues was this openness to recognize the kind of spiritual passion that is more powerful than the language we have to describe it.

I admit that recognizing that kind of spiritual passion is a little uncomfortable for me. After all, I have spent a lot of time, money, and energy trying to be good at talking about it. But there are times when I am really excited – ecstatic maybe -- or really angry for that matter, and I have to work really hard at being articulate because the passion I am experiencing is too big for words.

Not a surprise in the Pentecost story, Jack Levison says, that the crowd thinks these people must be drunk and there is this image of fire because these are the standard cultural signs of people who are ‘on fire’ – caught up in this message of the wonderful, amazing, mysterious works of God. And it’s too bad, he says, that interpreters line up on two sides of this story. Either this story is about ecstasy - - the kind of passion that can barely be contained in words -- or it’s about comprehensibility – about the power to communicate across languages and cultures and borders in ways that deeply connect us with one another.

Why not both? Why not “speaking in tongues” as the manifestation of the Spirit in powerful multi-lingual multi-cultural ways where I can hear my story in the stories of people very different from me *and* this spiritual passion for the mystery of God embodied in everyone? What if speaking in tongues, in other words, is about trying to communicate a kind of spiritual power that will always be bigger than any language we have for it?

So, when we sing, “Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me,” maybe the question to ask then is: What passion is stirring in me that is trying to find a way to connect with the world?

In the first half of this book that is Luke-Acts, Jesus stands up in his hometown synagogue and he reads from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor ... to release those who are oppressed and to say that this is the day it all gets started.”

Great news! the people say because we are poor and we are oppressed and it’s about time the Spirit showed up with some good news for us.

‘But wait, there’s more,’ Jesus says to them. ‘You remember those days when there were many widows in Israel and a great famine fell across the land. And the Spirit sent the prophet Elijah to none of them but to that widow in enemy territory – to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon?’

‘And remember that there were many lepers in Israel when the Spirit led the prophet Elisha to none of them but sent Elisha out to heal that arch-enemy, that general in the Syrian army, Naaman the Syrian?’

The Spirit is upon me with this passion to preach good news to *all* the poor and freedom for *all* the oppressed and the time for all that is right now.

And the people of his hometown are so angry with Jesus that they were ready to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus, the story says, “passes right through them and goes on his way.” He never returns to his hometown again.

Speaking in tongues, is about the kind of passion that reaches out beyond the borders of our own self-interest into the needs of the world. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised if people – even our own people – think that’s a little naïve and a little crazy.

In a way, that’s the story of Pentecost too. The Spirit falls indiscriminately on all these people so that they both speak in other people’s languages and hear in their own. It is, as Pastor Cathy has said, as much a miracle of the ear as it is the tongue. It’s speaking in tongues insofar as people actually speak and listen to one another.

And, like Jesus, Peter stands up to quote another prophet. This time it's Joel about the promise of the Spirit being poured out on *all* people – women and men, young and old, even on those you think to be the most insignificant.

And this becomes Peter's passion – this community that grows up out of this Pentecost-al experience of the Spirit.

If you read the following chapters in Acts, you discover that, while this community is his passion, he is still trying to figure out what he meant in that sermon he preached that day at Pentecost. Is the Spirit really being poured out on *all* people? That's what he said. But there are lessons he has to learn and catching up to do with the things he said in the heat – in the inspiration, in the passion – of the moment.

In other words, Peter has his own evolving to do right along with the community he is giving his life for. There is disorientation and confusion along the way and Peter and that community have to move through that on their way to some new understanding about God and the world.

When I was thinking about singing, “Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me,” I had to ask myself what that passion is stirring in me.

And the answer I keep coming back to is ... you. Honestly, you drive me crazy sometimes. I get disoriented by all that's going on in the world and distracted by all the things I have to do, but the passion that is stirring in me, is you because I believe in the difference we can make in the world and I can hear it in the voices of those Diverse Harmony kids who told us last week why this place *you* have created feels like home to them. If my imagination runs wild sometimes about all the things we can do and be together, I hope you will forgive me because it's the passion talking.

“The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor,” Jesus says, and then he spends the rest of his life trying to figure out what that means.

“The Spirit is being poured out on everyone,” Peter says, and then he spends the rest of his life trying to make sense of that in a community that struggles and fights ... *and* feeds the hungry and welcomes strangers and heals the broken and loves the ones who are sometimes not very likable.

The Spirit is upon me to do what I can to love you into the blessing you already are.

Every time *you* feel the Spirit moving in *your* heart, what then?

If this Pentecost story is to be believed, the Spirit of the living God is falling fresh on you. So, today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Jack Levison is professor of New Testament at Seattle Pacific University and a student of the movements identified with the gifts of the Spirit. See his *Inspired: the Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Eerdmans, 2013), p.97.