

How Is It that We Hear?
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-21

“And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

On late Saturday afternoon two weeks ago, following a service of worship at the Garden Tomb, a handful of our pilgrim band set out for a walk through the Arab market in the Old City of Jerusalem. No sooner had we crossed the road to enter by the Damascus Gate (I think) than we were engulfed by a crowd that included, to name a few, the ultra orthodox “Black Hats”, Muslim women with Hijab-covered heads, clerics in ecclesiastical garb looking self-important, Jewish men with kippot pinned to the back of their heads, children underfoot who looked like miniatures of the adults whose hands they held and, of course, tourists from every corner of the world.

The scene brought to mind Luke’s description of the crowd that had gathered in the same city on Pentecost long ago, save for the fact that the 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, Cretans and Arabs were all Jews of the Diaspora, Jews who had been dispersed in the Babylonian exile and who now either lived in Jerusalem or had traveled to the Temple (the Temple that was in ruins by the time Luke wrote the Book of Acts) to observe the Feast of Weeks, which marks both the spring barley harvest that falls fifty days after Passover and the giving of the Law to Moses.

For the better part of an hour, we walked through the dark and narrow streets of the souk with sights and smells that always invite me to imagine how little the Arab part of the Old City has changed in 2000 years, the storekeepers beseeching me as they have beseeched visitors to Jerusalem for centuries to “come in my shop, take a look, cost nothing to look.” This is usually

all I need to hear! Toward the end of the walk we entered the Jewish section of the Old City—near the Zion Gate--and passed the “traditional” Upper Room. Compared to the bustle of the Arab section, things were as quiet as they must have been when the disciples hid after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, waiting and praying for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly into the room came “a violent wind and divided tongues, as of fire.” Whatever it was that happened on that day in Jerusalem, the words we have been given mean to tell us that God’s Spirit was poured out on the apostles, turning their fear into the boldness necessary to be witnesses to the gospel in a hostile world; and (even more astonishing) God’s Spirit moved among the gathered pilgrims, giving each the ability to hear and understand the words of the apostles in their own language.

In a sense, we are those pilgrims today gathered around this text. How is it that we come to hear these words each in our own language and to understand the meaning of God’s power made manifest in our lives? Perhaps the more mundane question would be, “How is it that we hear--really hear--the words of another such that we understand in our own minds and hearts the truth the other has tried to speak?” “‘To communicate,’” said Paul Lehmann, “is not merely ‘to talk to somebody’—surely an idle use both of time and of the basically human in us all. ‘To communicate’ is to be in an actual relationship with somebody in which you give yourself to him and he gives himself to you.” What does this mean?

I am afraid our attempts at communication often mean this: if you really understand what I am saying, you will change your mind and see the world as I see it. As regards political perspectives, my father and I have mercifully given up on this project long ago. But I find myself wondering if that is what Luke is going for at the beginning of Acts. The account of Pentecost is troubled, according to one scholar, by Luke’s “persistent concern about the rejection of Jesus’

reign, especially by his own people.” So on a day when the city will be filled with Jews, Luke records Peter’s sermon, a sermon by a Jew unmistakably aimed at fellow Jews who had gathered for the festival: “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,” he begins; “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say”; “Fellow Israelites,” he continues; “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know,” he concludes. Know what? Know that “this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up....” This was the word Luke longed for his people to hear.

My heart does more than break when I hear those words. As I said last Sunday, this is the narrative whose murderous use over the last 2000 years is on our hands. You could say that Peter communicated in the sense of leading his fellow Jews to see as he sees. At the end of his sermon, the crowd was “cut to the heart and said..., ‘Brothers, what should we do?’” Three thousand Jews were baptized that day, were “added”, and devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.

A not so parenthetical aside: the apostles being Jews, the guess is that nothing much changed in practice until as late as the third century and beyond. This is why it is an anachronism now to call Pentecost the birthday of the church as we know it. According to the newly published Jewish Annotated New Testament, “the church on one side and the study houses of the rabbinic sages that would formulate the Mishnah and the Talmud on the other” would take centuries to separate and centuries more to ossify. On this day, Luke’s point is that, far from rejecting Jesus at the beginning, the Jews were the first to believe and be baptized. For Luke the miracle of Pentecost was not the birth of the church but the reconstitution of Israel.

How then, on a Pentecost Sunday fraught with the history of an institution whose hearing

of Peter's sermon has made conversion and adding to our number the church's mission rather than mutual hearing and understanding of God's address, how is it that we receive the gift of the Spirit *which is not something inside of us so much as it is something between us*? If we are to be witnesses in the world to the God whose Spirit imparts the gift of understanding, binding disparate human beings together in a particular way of sharing the world, then what is at stake when we seek to hear and speak the words that make it possible for human beings to be open *for* one another and *to* one another?

The question is not an idle question when asked in the Holy Land on a bus carrying Presbyterians and Jews from site to holy site. Whether considering biblical narratives, political narratives or the personal narratives that came to speech over the course of ten days together, I began to think about what seemed to be the two constants in the act of human communication and understanding: security and vulnerability. Sitting on the steps leading to the Southern Wall of the Second Temple while we were blocks away from the modern wall separating Israel and the West Bank (security and vulnerability); imagining the Jewish rebels looking from the incredible height of Masada at the outline of Roman encampments preparing their siege below (security and vulnerability); barely grasping the radical redefinition of security and vulnerability in the death camps that has yet to enter language for me; taking into my heart the ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane where all forsook him and fled (security and vulnerability); a political rally in Bethlehem calling for the release of Palestinian prisoners that our Palestinian guide would not speak about on the bus (security and vulnerability); ending Shabbat in the company of six people with six narratives that left many disconsolate or talking on the Golan Heights about the things that make for peace and seeing Lebanon and Jordan (with Egypt and Iran just out of sight) or late night discussions at the kibbutz where hard questions of each other

began to be dared or tears shed by Presbyterians at the end who were comforted by Jews counseling us to let go of our guilt. Security and vulnerability.

“Vulnerability,” writes theologian Kristine Culp,

is an enduring feature of creaturely existence; it is not a temporary condition that can be or ought to be overcome. Persons and communities remain vulnerable: they are always susceptible to harm and therefore almost inevitably marked by suffering and wrong—sometimes by unfathomable tragedy and brutality—and yet they are always also susceptible to transformation. Note, then,” says Culp, “that vulnerability does not equate with or necessarily entail powerlessness or weakness. Vulnerability is intrinsic to being creatures who are interdependent with other persons, living things, and the earth.

Or to borrow John Calvin’s phrase (*Simus:summus*): “Let us be whatever we are for each other” as through the work of the Spirit, our authentic humanity is brought to pass through authentic belonging.

The deceptive thing about the story before us this morning is the way understanding seems to be given instantaneously. I rather think that the vulnerability leading to interdependence and authentic belonging given by the Spirit also requires the hard human work of building trust. Here is where security comes into play, for just as vulnerability need not entail powerlessness or weakness, so security need not entail defensiveness and suspicion. Calvin’s phrase—let us be whatever we are for each other—presumes the security of being who I am so that the other can be who he is and so that together we may discover the selves we would not know without one another. Perhaps this was the aftermath of Pentecost, building trust as the newly baptized devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer, the same simple actions that led 44 Presbyterians and Jews to a new understanding of ourselves and of each other in the Holy Land.

“I am aware,” wrote Julian, our educator and friend upon his return,

that my narrative is not the only narrative in this wonderful and troubled land which I feel so strongly about. I sometimes wish it were and that I could just simply enjoy the

complex and exhilarating thoughts about Security and Vulnerability and not deal with the real issues at hand; that I could stand on the Western edge of the Golan Heights and look down at the kibbutzim below and talk about the topography and the questions it gives rise to without having to include existential questions, questions of life and death, without having to imagine what it would mean to have the bloody soldiers of the Assad regime looking down on the valley below; that I could engage in a discussion with Palestinian guests at a Havdalah service in Jerusalem and not have to deal with their anger over my question about the United Nations decision to partition Mandated Palestine; that I could agree with Irene, a woman filled with a desire to see only peaceful intentions among all people and not have to breathe deeply and then disagree with her when all I want is to agree with her. I want to be able to live with both security and vulnerability in my own being, in my narrative and in my land. Can I do this? Is this my strength or will it be my weakness?

“What does this mean?” asked that crowd long ago in Jerusalem. I pray it means that if we are to be witnesses in the world to the God whose Spirit imparts the gift of understanding, binding disparate human beings together in a particular way of sharing the world, then the same Spirit will give us power to live in a great trust and tenderness, claiming the security and vulnerability that constitutes our human being, hearing and speaking the words that make it possible to be open *for* one another and *to* one another live, bringing our authentic humanity to pass through our authentic belonging, one to another. Let this be our strength and our hope. Amen.