

After the Fire  
Genesis 11:1-11  
Acts 2:1-21

“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?’”

Without arms or charm of culture,  
Unimportant persons  
From an unimportant Province,  
They did as the Spirit bid,  
Went forth into a joyless world  
Of swords and rhetoric  
To bring it joy.

Unimportant persons from an unimportant Province, you and I bring to this Pentecost Sunday a world broken by divisions of race, class, party, ethnicity and nationality; divisions that must give even the Holy Spirit pause; divisions that make the violent wind and tongues of fire seem downright plausible in comparison with the common understanding experienced among the crowd on that day long ago. In fact, when I think of generations who have dismissed the special effects and so the whole story of Pentecost as fantasy, I imagine Luke shaking his head in disbelief at our sophisticated reason that refuses the one needful thing revealed in Luke’s story for times such as these: refuses the future the Holy Spirit is letting loose in the world. God only knows what you literally would have seen had you been in Jerusalem when the day of Pentecost arrived; I can only offer on this Pentecost the story Luke tells about the giving of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that is present today wherever understanding among God’s diverse and divided children bears witness to God’s reign begun on earth.

Luke’s story begins on the fiftieth day after Easter. For the Jews, it was the day of Pentecost, a feast day when the spring barley harvest was offered to God. But more importantly, it was the day when these twelve tribes gathered to celebrate the gift of the commandments that set them apart as God’s people. On that day, the story goes, the wind and fire and lightening surrounded Sinai as God spoke the words of the commandments to Moses and, through Moses, to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. What followed in Scripture was the history of a distinctive people, united by blood and promise, chosen in their particularity to be a light to the nations.

I think it not by chance that Pentecost is also the day when the church remembers the gift of the Spirit that gathered a community of men and women and children related not by blood but by baptism. On this day, the story goes, the wind and fire surrounded a little band of waiting believers, all descendants of Abraham in the beginning, who were about to be sent out by God’s Spirit as witnesses to love’s triumph over death. What follows in Scripture is the story of a diverse people—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—chosen in Christ and united by God’s Spirit in baptism to bear witness to God’s reign.

Luke gets the enormity of this paradigm shift! The last question he has the apostles ask Jesus before he is taken up into heaven is a question rooted in the politics and promise of a nation: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (“Lord, is this the time when you will make Israel great again?”) Ten days later, the Spirit arrives to gather a people who will turn the world upside down, disrupting the politics of nation and race, of creed and class, because Christ and not Caesar is king, because love and not death reigns eternally. These things they confessed as they were fed to the lions, witnesses to God’s reign begun here and now.

Next Luke tells us that on Pentecost “they” were all together in one place. Exactly who was all together in one place? The eleven apostles now restored to twelve with the addition of Matthias? A few centuries later, a hierarchy would declare that the twelve men were the significant characters in Jerusalem that day. Yet there were certain women with them, Luke reminds us, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers; and there were more—a crowd numbering about one hundred twenty persons. When Luke writes “they,” I think Luke means more than the twelve. He means that the apostles, the family of Jesus, and another one hundred twenty persons were together in one place because their teacher, who was dead, had been raised. This is the “they” waiting in Jerusalem for the promised gift of the Spirit, little knowing that “they” would become a ‘cell of messengers and advocates in the world on behalf of the world’s own future.’ [Robert Jenson]

I think of Pope Francis this week, hinting that women just might be used of the Spirit to be deacons in the church. We would do well to remember, before we get too cocky, that it took Presbyterians about 2030 years to admit that the Spirit

just might be able to use women as the Spirit first used women on the day of Pentecost: to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. Likewise as we watch the Methodists wrestle with the Spirit's claim on the lives of LGBTQ members, their present fear should chasten our own long refusal of the Spirit's leading. Who will the Spirit send into the world with the gospel? Unimportant persons from an unimportant Province, silenced by the powers of the world, but claimed by the Spirit as witnesses to God's reign begun in their midst.

As they were all gathered in one place, Luke continues, the Spirit roars in like a violent wind and tongues of fire, the tongues resting on every waiting one of them, giving them the ability to speak in a language that was not their own. That is to say, the Spirit equipped the church, in the beginning, to go to the ends of the earth, bearing witness to the good news of God's reign in the native language of every nation. In a sense, Luke is telling us that the Spirit was given not for the spiritual enlightenment of those gathered. Nor did the Spirit send them out simply to recruit people all over the world to join a new religious institution, even though the church mistakenly came to think that its mission was the adding of persons and power to itself. Rather, on that day, the Spirit gave these "unimportant persons from an unimportant Province" a language not their own, gave them the native language of every nation, so that the church might be, in Paul Lehmann's words, the "fellowship creating reality of Christ's presence in the world."

I imagine the Spirit presently giving the church the language of a single mother who longs to be set free from welfare by a job and child care; the language of the father with dementia whose words evoke a world the church has been sent to inhabit with him; the language of the refugee whose hopes and dreams are no less than those of our own ancestors as they crossed the border; the language of the transgendered child who trembles at the prospect of becoming the latest victim of this nation's politicized fears. The Spirit is giving us a language not our own, that we may become the "fellowship creating reality of Christ's presence in the world" today. This is how the Spirit equips the church to get the gospel said to the whole world.

Luke then tells us, on that day, Jerusalem was filled with immigrants: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. As another preacher observed, Luke's "'random' table of nations resembles a random sampling of shoppers in my Midwest grocery store: Sikhs, Norwegians, Cubans, Columbians, Mexicans, Ethiopians, Oromo, Sudanese, Pakistani, Ojibway, German...and more." In their own languages, they heard the church speaking about God's deeds of power. Not tongues, not the glossolalia that the church would later fight about, but in the native languages of immigrants, the gospel got said. "This is the miracle of Pentecost," according to New Testament professor Amy Allen. "Indeed, throughout the rest of Acts, the apostles engage in proclamation and mission that goes *out* to people of all nations, that *accommodates* different diets and cultural practices, not demanding that converts come to them, but rather bringing the good news of Jesus to meet everyone *where they are*."

With xenophobia in the ascendancy—build a wall, ban all Muslims, fear the other--the witness given the church by the Spirit is a witness that delights in the diversity of God's children. Impossible as it may be for this nation to imagine, when someone meets you where you are, reaches out to you in your own language, "when someone *sees* you for who you are at your core," Allen writes, "it's a lot easier to hear what they have to say in return." Allen tells the story of being a student chaplain in a Dallas hospital where many of the patients were Hispanic. She was given a set of index cards with simple Spanish phrases and prayers. One day she was called into the room of a woman who was frantic. This is usually when people call a chaplain, by the way! "I did the only thing I could think to do," she reports. "I pulled out my index card and began to read: '*Padre nuestro...*' I'm sure my pronunciation was horrible. But the woman stopped. She smiled softly at me, bowed her head, and, whispering, joined in the prayer as I continued." "It's about hearing and being heard. It's about seeing another person for who they are." Frankly I think so much of the upset right now in our nation has that at its core. People who feel that they have not been seen for who they are. People on every side of the political divide. (The difference between Caesar's reign and God's reign is that, in Caesar's reign, being seen and heard is a zero sum game: if you are heard, I am silenced and vice versa. In God's reign, all are heard and seen because God's love has made room for us all.) "Christ is declared and given to all believers, just as they are," Luther would write in 1520, "with all that they are: works, sufferings, services, graces, possessions! Nothing is left out!" The Spirit is present today wherever understanding among God's diverse and divided children bears witness to God's reign begun on earth.

Finally, when the astonished and the bewildered immigrants asked what this meant, Peter turned to the words of a prophet who had imagined the scene some five hundred years before it happened: God's Spirit would be poured out on men and women, sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free, to the end that the divisions between God and humankind and the divisions among all of God's children would finally come to an end.

On this Pentecost Day, what is the future that the Spirit is letting loose on the world? I find myself thinking of the First Presbyterian Church of Englewood, New Jersey, and their cheery minister who stands in the ruins of his church that went up in flames a few weeks before Easter this year. He points to the remains of the pipe organ, the largest in Bergen

County, on the pile of charred timber. The stone walls are intact, except for the top of the western wall. The debris is being removed by cranes. The stained glass windows survive and are being restored. He says that the church is working with architects to build a church for the future because they cannot recreate the past. The steeple, the windows, the stone walls of their history remain, their foundation; but the life of the church has to reflect the future God is giving them. After the fire, the Spirit enters in.

May that same Spirit empower all now gathered in this place to become, more and more, the fellowship creating reality of Christ's presence in the world, speaking a language not our own, seeing others through the lens of God's love, bearing witness to God's reign wherever understanding grows among God's diverse and divided children and so rejoicing in the future the Spirit is letting loose in the world. Thanks be to God.