

Scripture Reading AND Sermon for Peter's First Sermon

Acts 2:1-21

June 5, 2022, West Valley Presbyterian Church

Scripture reading

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

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And 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? 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, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: '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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Pentecost Sermon

1. So. Were you surprised? Scripture tells us that when the people heard the disciples speaking all at once, in different languages, about God's deeds of power, that they were "amazed and perplexed."

A. I'll bet they were! These disciples are Galileans. They are not world travelers. They haven't been to all the regions of the Roman Empire. They were trained to be fishermen and farmers, not diplomats and teachers. Their native language was Aramaic, which was what Jesus usually spoke too. They also spoke Hebrew, since that was the language used in the synagogues; plus some Greek, since that was the language that the Romans used for trade or official business throughout their empire. But nothing else! The disciples haven't even been to Egypt or Parthia or Pamphylia or any of the other countries mentioned by the crowd. So how could they possibly have been able to speak all these other languages?

B. Not only that – the people in the crowd are from all over the Roman empire, so they may not have known anything about these deeds of power that the disciples are talking about. It had only been 50 days since Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and only 10 days since his ascension into heaven. And there was no internet or even Pony Express; most news traveled at walking speed: 3 miles an hour. So the content of what they were saying was also astonishing. God raised someone from the dead? What? Witnesses saw him and touched him? Really? That's not easy for people to accept even now.

C. So if you were surprised to hear people speaking, all at once, out of turn, at a point in worship when everyone except the preacher is supposed to be quiet, then, maybe you can get some idea of how amazed and perplexed the people who were there in Jerusalem would have been. They may or may not have heard anything about Jesus. But none of them have ever heard God broadcasting in every language available before, all at the same time, through human beings who didn't even speak those languages! Nothing like that has ever happened before or since!

D. None have ever heard God speaking in every language available, all at the same time, through human beings who didn't speak those languages. We may have heard "speaking in tongues" before (I have, maybe you have too); but that's a different work of the Holy Spirit than what's being described in Acts 2. Pentecost really was a uniquely astonishing miracle of speech that had never happened before and hasn't happened again.

E. Nor does it need to happen again. The message about what God has done for us in Jesus has gone into nearly every part of the world, in nearly every language spoken by people groups everywhere. The full Bible has been translated into 704 languages; the NT into an additional 1,551 languages; and Bible stories into 1,160 more languages (Wikipedia).

2. I'd like to focus today on another miracle that also happened at Pentecost: the miracle of hearing. When you heard the (5, 6?) people speaking all at once, could you understand any of them? I'm guessing not, (unless one person was much louder than everyone else.) We can sometimes

comprehend two people speaking at once, saying different things; but more than that, nope, we can't do it. That's why parents are always saying to their children, "One at a time; I can't understand you if you all speak at once." That's why students have to raise their hands to speak and take turns.

A. So the miracle of Pentecost wasn't just a miracle of speaking. It was also a miracle of hearing. If there had been no miraculous hearing, the crowds of people from different countries would have heard nothing more than cacophony. Very unpleasant indistinguishable noise. They wouldn't have been able to distinguish the voice of someone speaking to them in their own language, telling them about what God had done in their midst.

B. The miracle of hearing is what I'd like us to focus on today. In our world today God's word is readily available, in whatever native language you speak. God is still speaking. But hearing what God is saying? I think that's more difficult now than it has ever been.

a. First, there's the fact that our world is physically much noisier now than it's ever been before. Internal combustion engines are noisy. Even if you have an electric vehicle, there's still the noise from the friction of tires on the pavement and the friction from the air as you speed through the atmosphere. And then there's airplanes. Japantown, where Rob and I live, is near the airport. We don't need an alarm, because the planes start taking off and landing at 6 am sharp. There is warfare – the vets that I know are mostly deaf because of the noise of shooting off weapons. There are musical instruments – guilty as charged; I have a grand piano and a keyboard. There are beepers and buzzers and loudspeakers everywhere you go. And there are the phones that we all carry with us, and forget to silence. The little hairs in our inner ears that transmit sound vibrations get damaged by all their overwork, and we lose our hearing. We are designed to be able to hear very quiet sounds (like a whisper). We are not designed to handle the physical noise that we all live in, all the time.

b. And then, there's the fact that more things clamor for our attention than has ever been the case before. Even if one is not a techie, it's way too easy to get sucked into the endlessly whirling ocean of information and ads and self-promotion and jokes and untruths and rage known as the internet. Even when I'm writing a sermon and trying my best to focus on God, and what God is saying, I'm still tempted to check my messages or scroll through my news feeds. We have to cope with a lot more distractions now than there were even ten years ago, let alone two thousand years ago; and our brains have not yet adapted to the cyber world which we have created and in which we now live. So our world is mentally, and emotionally, noisier than it has ever been before, as well as being physically noisier. God is still speaking; but we are less and less able to hear him.

3. So what can we do to improve our hearing of what God is saying to us?

A. First, we need to adjust our expectations. God does still speak to us. But usually it's without much drama. And usually faith is involved.

- a. I wish that God would speak so spectacularly and clearly that everyone on earth would hear him, without a doubt. But that hasn't happened yet; even at Pentecost there were scoffers, saying, "Ah, these guys are just drunk."
- b. And when I wish that God would turn up the volume, it helps to remember that God says he wants us to have faith in him. So it makes sense that he speaks in ways that will exercise our faith and help it to grow.
- c. For example, the Joel text that Peter quoted here, really resonated with me when I was fighting God's call to give up being a research chemist and go to seminary. Especially, "your sons AND YOUR DAUGHTERS shall prophesy." This verse echoed within my soul, reverberated in my mind, by the work of the Holy Spirit.
- d. Yes, God can and still does speak in dreams and visions; but not often. He doesn't want to deafen us. He wants rather to improve our hearing. So he usually speaks to us through the means he has provided for us. Through Scripture, like with that Joel verse. Through the counsel of other Christians, who sometimes say exactly what we need to hear – whose words we remember and reflect on. Through worship. Like when Pastor Morgan started this sermon series, some of his words stuck with me and encouraged me to ponder God's consistency. Like when a song that Hardy chooses helps me focus on God and not on traffic or dinner menus.

B. And second, to improve our hearing of what God is saying to us, we also need to be willing to turn down the physical and mental noise once in awhile. There's a reason why Christians for 2000 years have gone on retreats, or spent time every day in silent prayer and Scripture reading. It's to turn down the volume of everything else – especially the cacophony of the internet - so that we can better hear God.

- a. I know that can be hard. For instance, every morning when I get up to pray, I use a Scripture app on my phone. It's very convenient, and I don't have to turn on the light, which is good. But guess what else is on my phone? I'm finding that I spend more time reading my news feeds, than I do reading Scripture. So I think I'm going to have to go back to using an ink and paper Bible in my morning prayer, rather than a phone app.
- b. But even though it's hard, it's worth it to turn down the volume of everything else, and just be with God and listen. If his Holy Spirit brought about a miracle of hearing back in the Jerusalem of 2000 years ago, who knows? Perhaps, the Holy Spirit will open our ears and help us to hear what God is saying to us. Amen.