

**Pentecost C 2010
May 23, 2010**

“In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

It was the feast of Pentecost, Shavu’ot, the Festival of Weeks. It was a Jewish festival that marked the first harvest of the season, 50 days after Passover. Jerusalem was filled with festival goers. It looked like downtown East Lansing did yesterday at the art festival. A mob of happy, celebrating people talking to their friends, their families, their countrymen, chattering away in whatever language they spoke: Aramaic, koine Greek, Coptic, dialects from all over the Mediterranean basin. The babble was deafening. The chatter unceasing.

It was the feast of Pentecost, and in one small upstairs room, no one was celebrating. Gathered there were the twelve disciples, reconstituted with Matthias filling the place Judas Iscariot once held. There were women there too, from Galilee, including Jesus’ mother. They were locked inside, murmuring quietly among themselves in their own rough Galilean dialect. They were not partying with the festival crowd. They were indoors, wondering what would happen to them next, now that Jesus, even the risen Jesus was gone from them. He had told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait. So wait they did.

Then something happened. Like wind, like fire, like a roaring blast, like a silent whisper. Something happened. Everything changed. The huddled group in the locked room opened their mouths and words came out. Words and words and words. Words they didn’t even understand, but they were speaking, singing, shouting in these words.

And the crowds began to gather under the open windows. The words poured out into the streets, into the babble, into the conversations of the crowds and people stopped. And they listened. Because coming out of those windows were words they understood, words in their own language, words about the power of God and what God had done in Jesus Christ.

They were stunned. Amazed. Surely these people were drunk or high or crazy or something. “In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power,” they marveled.

The tiny band of Galileans poured out of the house into the street. Still speaking, still proclaiming, still telling the story of Jesus and what God had done through him. Still speaking in the languages of the whole known world, talking to Medes and Parthians and Elamites and Cappadocians and Egyptians and Cretans and Cypriots and Arabs – in their own languages. “This is what God has done for us,” the message went. “This is what God has done for you.”

And the crowds heard the gospel, each in his or her own language. Heard, and responded. 3,000 people heard and understood and Peter told the story of his friend Jesus. 3,000 people were rocked to their core by the power of his message. 3,000 people were baptized that day, and so, they say the church was born. In Jerusalem, on Pentecost, 2,000 years ago.

But they didn’t know the half of it, on that morning in Jerusalem. They could see already that the message was not just for them, not just for a core group of Galilean faithful. It wasn’t even meant for the Jews of Palestine. Jews from all over the Roman Empire heard and responded to the gospel. It was bigger than Nazareth, bigger than Jerusalem. They couldn’t see then, that it was even bigger than that -- that it was meant for the nations of the world, for people who were not Jewish at all, for pagan Gentiles, for Romans and Greeks and Gauls and Celts.

They couldn’t see then that there were parts of the world they had never imagined, people they had never met. That somehow the message would make its way to Inuits and Russians and Maori and Chinese. That in villages in Africa and cathedrals in England people would hear the news of God’s deeds of power, each in their own language.

Well, but that's just the fruit of imperialism, you might say. The Romans, the French, the Spanish, the English, conquering and converting all at the same time. And there is some truth to that ... Bishop Tutu tells the story of when white people came to Africa. 'When white people came to Africa,' he says, 'we had the land and they had a Book. They said, "let us bow our head and pray" and we did, and when we raised our heads, THEY had the land, and WE had the book.'

But the Spirit is crafty. The Spirit is an opportunist. Look what miracles Tutu and Nelson Mandela have wrought with that Book and the power of its message. In their own language, they spoke of God's deeds of power. People heard their words, and responded.

The Spirit is powerful. The Spirit is tenacious. The Spirit put the words of old spirituals in the mouths of civil rights protestors in the 1960s. They sang of God's deeds of power as they marched through Selma, as they walked into the water of the fire hoses, as they fell under the clubs of the police. People heard their words, and responded.

The Spirit is an inspiration, an artist, a creator. In the summer of 1741, in the space of two weeks, George Fredrich Handel composed his great oratorio, Messiah. It has been sung everywhere in the world for more than 250 years. One cold December night in southern Germany, I wandered into a church where Messiah was being performed. Even though the choir sung in German, I knew the piece too well. I heard every word in my head in English. In my own language, I heard them singing about God's deeds of power.

The Spirit is a strengthener. The Spirit is a sustainer. This past spring, in Haiti, I was invited to go to "house church" at the home of a parishioner at St. Pierre's Episcopal Church. When I arrived, I found 50 or more people gathered in the front yard, and three young people on the porch. With song, and scripture and preaching and prayer, they stood up and praised the Lord there in the gathering darkness for three hours that night. Three hours to say "thank you" to God, even after the hurricanes. Even after the earthquake. Even under a government that does less than nothing for them.

I didn't understand a word they were saying, until the keyboard player started that familiar chord sequence and they all launched into "Amazing Grace," in Kreyol. I sang along, full-throated, in English. Each in our own languages, we sang together of God's deeds of power.

The Spirit can speak to anyone, through anyone, no matter how old, no matter how young, no matter how well-educated or uneducated, no matter how rich or how poor, how sick or how healthy, all any of us has to do is give up and give over and let the Spirit speak through us, telling that story, sharing the good news of God's love for the world.

When my daughter Katie was about three, she drew me a picture one day. It was a rough, childlike sketch of Jesus on the cross. He had those little kid picture hands, the circles with lots of straight lines for fingers. He also seemed to be winking, as if to say ... "hang on for the rest of the story, folks." Next to this carefully executed crucifix, Katie wrote in that sort of "found language" that small children use, the one that sort of sounds it all out and usually forgets the vowels ... Crhst hs did. Chrst hs rsn. Chrst wil cm agin.

In her own language, she spoke of God's deeds of power. The same exact story that Peter told with such vigor that morning in Jerusalem. The saving story of God's love for us. The amazing gift of Jesus Christ. The power of God to heal anything, save everything, love everyone.

It's Pentecost. And there is a world outside babbling away, hungry, lonely, busy, distracted and confused, blown hither and yon by forces no one understands and that no one can control. But it's Pentecost. And the Spirit is moving even now -- in you, in me, speaking, singing, praying, and finally driving us out those doors into our city. To speak, to sing, to pray, to proclaim -- in our language, in their language, in any language possible -- the good news of God's amazing love.

Oh Lord, open thou our lips. And let that wind blow. Let that fire burn. Let us speak.