

Many Languages, One Voice
Acts 2:1-21
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It is easy, on Pentecost, to marvel at the power of the Holy Spirit, coming in such a dramatic way to a house in Jerusalem. It is easy, on Pentecost, to be amazed at the wind and fire; you don't see that every day. It is easy, on Pentecost, to get caught up in the amazing event of some down on their luck Galileans suddenly speaking at least fifteen different languages, languages they could not possibly have known. It is also easy, on Pentecost, to overlook the obvious, that although that Holy Spirit came, and although it came with fire and wind, and although they spoke miraculously in many languages, they spoke in just one voice. And that one voice, heard in those fifteen different languages, proclaimed one thing, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The text tells us that the actual words they spoke were of "God's deeds of power," but what is that, except the truth that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved?" And when Peter gets up to defend himself from the charges of being drunk, he is simply distilling in his sermon what they all had actually been saying.

Where did that voice come from? From the wind and tongues, of course. You see, a curious thing happened on Pentecost, at the very least a curious literary thing, but also a divine metaphor for the ages. What was it that descended on them while they were all together? "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,

and a tongue rested on each of them.” A tongue. And what was it that Peter used to proclaim the fact that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved?” His tongue. And that’s not even to mention that those who spoke in all the languages of those assembled in Jerusalem, spoke with what? Their tongues. God has a great sense of symbol and metaphor.

Another curious thing happened in that same vein. Even before they saw those “divided tongues, as of fire,” what did they experience? “A sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” And isn’t it divinely curious that what blew into the house that day, blew all of the disciples out of the house, never to return again. Before that event, the only people they had been talking to were themselves, caught up in replacing Judas, processing the murder and resurrection on Jesus, and dealing with their Christ-given charge to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That was a lot to deal with. Imagine the plans to be made, the strategies to be determined, the details to be worked out. That’s a lot of conversation among those insiders. But once that wind blew through that house, they began to speak to others, the outsiders, figuratively and literally, their speaking in different languages a jump start by the Spirit. No longer was it an internal dialogue. Now it was a public proclamation.

And so, what had been a fearful collection of followers of Jesus became a bold band of disciples of Jesus, claiming the power he bequeathed to them by the

Holy Spirit. You will note that none of the disciples, in any of the Gospels, before or after Jesus' death and resurrection, make the kind of proclamation that Peter does after he is accused of being drunk. It is as if the experience of Pentecost flipped a switch for his tongue, and off he goes, making his case, and explaining it all, and summoning those listening to the faith he has just had confirmed by the Holy Spirit. All of this seemed to gel on Pentecost, and Peter would be just the first of many who would testify, even to this day, of "God's deeds of power."

I'm making the case that to speak of "God's deeds of power," as the disciples did, is to proclaim the conclusion of the first part of Peter's speech, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Peter is, of course, quoting the prophet Joel, who uttered this message of God some five or six centuries earlier. In Joel, these words are words of hope for the future, describing with surety, rather than predicting, God's reversal of the fortunes of an Israel overrun by several kinds of locusts, and more than one enemies. The key term for Joel is "the day of the Lord," that great Old Testament code phrase for the day of God's judgment, the day God takes charge of the situation, and brings all the promises of salvation and redemption to fruition. Joel is describing, and Peter is remembering, what will happen when that day comes, and it all begins with God's Spirit being poured out on all flesh, men and women, slaves and free, young and old. After that, there will be signs in the skies and on earth below that show God's power and put fear into the hearts of those who have not repented, for they know

that something cataclysmic is about to happen. On that day, when God has done God's thing, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," "everyone" being those who have turned from their wicked ways and repented, prerequisites for calling authentically on the name of the Lord.

Clearly, Peter has connected the dots. He recognizes the pouring out of the Spirit prophesied in Joel as what has just happened in Jerusalem. There may not have been visions or dreams, but the Spirit was poured out. There may not have been people prophesying, at least not in the traditional sense, but they spoke of God's power. And the Spirit was poured out nonetheless. The day of the Lord has come, Peter announces, in Jesus Christ, through this wind of the Holy Spirit, and the moment of decision has arrived for those who are listening, to turn from their wicked ways, to repent, to authentically call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. He will go on to tell again the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and through that story, help the rest of them connect the dots about Jesus, as he has done about the words of the prophet Joel.

Since that very moment on Pentecost, we've been living in that divine and creative tension between "now" and "not yet," knowing that Jesus has inaugurated the day of the Lord, but still awaiting that final day of judgment. That tension is what we celebrate especially during the season of Advent, but it peeks through every so often during the rest of the year to remind us of its centrality in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. The "last days," as Joel describes the events leading

up to the final day of the Lord, are measured in days God counts, and we wonder about. If Peter is right about the pouring out of the Spirit, and I believe he is, we are in those “last days,” even if we don’t know how long they will last. We have received the Spirit, we dream dreams and see visions, we prophecy, but for how much long is not for us to know. What we do know, is that in these last days, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved,” and we are pleased to be a part of that number.

The rest of the book of Acts takes up the story of what Peter and the rest of the disciples did with that good news, and from their acts, we catch a glimpse of how we too are to live in this indeterminate time. Once he finishes this first speech, and many more call upon the name of the Lord, the action begins, and in the very next chapter, we see this same Peter, along with John, heal a man lame from birth, calling upon the name of the Lord for that man’s sake, and for Christ’s sake. Empowered by the Spirit of Pentecost, Peter continues to use his tongue, and continues to talk to outsiders rather than insiders, and God’s deeds of power multiply. This suggests to me that we are to be mindful of who are our conversation partners about Jesus Christ, and whether or not we are speaking, in words or deeds. There is no difference between Peter and ourselves in this respect. We may not have received the ability to heal with the touch of our hands, but we have received, each of us, a tongue as of fire, and have experienced the rush of a

violent wind, and so we are called as Peter was to tell the story of God's deeds of power. Lives are depending on it.

Let me suggest further that, just as Peter did, we will hear the name of the Lord being called upon. Sometimes it will be the name of the Lord directly which we hear invoked, but other times it will be our names, it will be Tom, Harry, Betty or Sue. We will be the first call for help by people who may or may not know that we draw our strength and salvation from Jesus Christ, but who believe, out of faith, or simply desperation, that we can play a role in their healing, or their reconciliation, or their addiction, or their salvation. In these cases, we will play momentary stand-in for the body of Christ, by being the body of Christ. That is to say that when others call on our names, and we respond, we are Christ responding. When others call on our names, and we love, we are Christ loving. When others call on our names, and we are generous, we are the giving and generous Christ. Although it goes without saying that God does the saving through Jesus Christ, it is worth proclaiming that Jesus Christ works through us, so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." We are his heart, his hands, and his voice after all, are we not? At ECF, perhaps more than at other churches, we really do proclaim God's deeds of power in many languages. But may we also always speak in one voice, like the disciples did, of how the Holy Spirit has blown through our lives, the first time, once again this Pentecost, and for the rest of our lives. Amen.