

“The Language of Grace”

“Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

No matter how many times I have seen them, Niagara Falls still fills me with awe. It is no wonder that every year millions of people come to the Falls to view this spectacular sight and all the grandeur that the Niagara region has to offer. During the years we lived in Niagara Falls, we would often take walks along the river near Table Rock and would be amazed by the variety of languages we would hear being spoken during our walks. From all corners of the world, people traveled to Niagara to marvel at what can rightfully be called one of the wonders of the world.

As amazed as I was by the variety of languages I would hear during these walks, I never considered the circumstances of those visitors until one day a Japanese couple showed up at the door of our church building, which was only a few blocks from the park. Their identification badges told us that they were a part of a tour group and that they had somehow gotten separated from their group, but because their badges were in Japanese and they only spoke their native language we knew that it would be a challenge to assist this couple, who were clearly terrified by the situation in which they found themselves. But then we noticed that they were holding a map of the area, and that even though it was in Japanese the sites on the map were well known to us. After inviting them inside to sit for a while and have a cold drink, we got out their map and began pointing to familiar sites in the area. We began with the Falls, which they clearly identified, and then pointed to the location of our church building. After they recognized where they were, they studied the map and found the location of their hotel, which was only a few blocks away. I got out my car keys and pointed to my car in the parking lot, and their expressions told me that they were very receptive to a ride to their hotel. We got in the car and drove to the hotel, and no sooner did we arrive at its front door that several members of their tour group came out and eagerly greeted them. Their once-terrified faces were now filled with joy and relief; they bowed to us and expressed what I knew were words of thanks, even though I did not understand their words. As I drove back to my office, I was glad that we were able to be of assistance, but I also gained an understanding of what it must feel like to be in an unfamiliar place where you cannot easily understand or communicate the local language.

I often think of this episode when I read the story of Pentecost and Luke's account of this day when "*there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.*" (Acts 2:5). These people had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, a word that means "fiftieth day" that was used by Diaspora Jews to identify a day-long harvest festival that was more commonly known as the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), scheduled fifty days following Passover in fulfillment of the commandment in the Torah that "*you shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour.*" (Exodus 23:16). This harvest festival had also become a commemoration of God's giving the covenant and law on Mount Sinai. Pentecost was one of three pilgrimage festivals "*when the entire household of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the goodness of God toward the nation.*" (Robert W. Wall).

As people of all corners of the known world gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebration, the followers of Jesus were gathered together waiting the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they would be "*clothed with power from on high*" (Luke 24:49) so that they would "*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). For ten days following Jesus' ascension, they waited patiently and confidently, knowing that no matter how long their time of waiting might be that God is faithful and Jesus' promises would be fulfilled. This fulfillment happens "*when the day of Pentecost had come, [and] they were all together in one place.*" (2:1), when "*suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.*" (2:2). The inbreaking of heaven into human affairs is a prominent feature of Luke's narrative; the Christmas story features his account of the angels appearing to the shepherds with the message that "*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*" (Luke 2:11). "Wind" (*pneuma*) is often a sign of the Spirit in Scripture; the appearance of the Lord to Moses on Mount Sinai was accompanied by loud noises, wind, and fire:

- "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak, and God would answer him in thunder." – Exodus 19:16-19.

It should be noted that the passage does not claim that the Holy Spirit *is* a “wind” or “fire”; the Spirit is compared to the sound wind makes and to the flames fire produces (“*you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers*” – Psalm 104:4). Luke’s report that ‘*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*’ (2:3) recalls the call of the prophet Isaiah, when an angel of the Lord touches his lips with a live coal so that he might proclaim the word of the Lord to God’s people:

- “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is departed, and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here I am, send me!’” – Isaiah 6:6-8.

The Evangelist’s intent is to “*create a vivid impression of the Spirit’s presence among the community of the Lord’s disciples as a distinguishing mark*” (Wall). The result of the bestowing of “tongues of fire” upon the disciples is that “*all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*” (2:4). The gift of speaking in languages that they previously did not have the ability to speak enables the disciples to fulfill Jesus’ commission to be witnesses to all people, and to testify to the gathering of “*devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.*” (2:5). Like the visitors to Niagara Falls who found themselves surrounded by people speaking languages with which they were unfamiliar, in a place where they did not know the local language, the sound of people speaking words they could understand was startling; Luke reports that “*at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.*” (2:6). What was even more amazing was that they were hearing their native languages spoken by people with Galilean accents; the native accent of Jesus and his disciples was apparently quite distinctive, and Galileans were apparently notorious for their lack of linguistic talent. This may explain why the crowd was “*amazed and astonished*” and asked “*are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?*” (2:7). Luke then offers a list of the home nations of the people who had gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost both to show the great diversity of this crowd and to witness that the entire household of Israel, including “*both Jews and proselytes*” (2:10) – converts to Judaism – is present to hear this inspired witness to Israel, that “*in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power*” (2:11). While some in the crowd were “amazed and perplexed,” wondering

“*what does this mean?*” the more cynical members of the crowd sneered and said dismissively said that “*they are filled with new wine*” (2:12-13).

The crowd’s confusion leads Peter to interpret what they have witnessed while dispelling their ignorance about the Messiah. Almost a third of the book of Acts consists of speeches, most of which focus on the gospel’s central claim that God’s resurrection of Jesus confirms him as Messiah and through him God has acted faithfully to save the world from sin and death. While Peter is the one who speaks, his “*standing with the eleven*” shows that he is speaking as a representative of all who have been called to be witnesses to Christ’s death and resurrection. Peter begins by calling upon the assembled crowd to “*listen to what I say*” (2:14); the crowd’s ignorance about the Messiah will be reversed only if they listen well to the message of Peter and the apostles. Peter defends the community’s Pentecost experience against the charge that it must be the result of drunken debauchery: “*Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning*” (2:15). What they have witnessed is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel of the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon all flesh, which will extend beyond Israel to all nations:

- “Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.” – Joel 2:28-32.

Peter quotes the prophecy of Joel to indicate that Pentecost initiates a new epoch, “*the last days*” of God’s salvation history. Events that fulfill biblical prophecy are in God’s plan of salvation. The “signs and wonders” mark the presence and the progress of the Spirit who prepares the way for the church’s missionary work, with its promise of empowered witness and God’s salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord. The promise that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (2:21) will continue to be a key element of the apostle’s teaching and witness in Acts, including Peter’s later declaration that “*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*” (10:34-35). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowers the apostles to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in the languages of all people, so that all

may hear this liberating word and know that the gospel is good news for them as well, for Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

- “At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, and with a mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire for a moment overcame human differences and united that diverse and dispirited company by the gift of understanding. They heard the good news as they were, where they were, and they were never the same again. Pentecost is many things – fire, wind, ecstasy, and renewal – but more than all that it is the Spirit whose gift is that of understanding, of knowing who and whose we are. We celebrate today once again that gift to them and to us, and we pray that what transformed them may transform us, and with us the world for God and Christ.” – Peter Gomes.

Pentecost is often celebrated as the birthday of the Church, which our Lutheran Confessions define as “*the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the gospel.*” (*Augsburg Confession*). While the apostles had been eyewitnesses to Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and miracles, and had witnessed his resurrected presence and been commissioned as his witnesses, it was only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that they are able to fulfill Jesus’ command to bring his liberating word to the ends of the earth. It may truly be said that “*without the Holy Spirit, there are no Christians; without the Holy Spirit, there is no Church*” The gift of the Holy Spirit remains important for every generation of God’s people; in the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther focuses on the importance of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of God’s people in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed:

- “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.”

When through water and the Word we are reborn children of God in Holy Baptism we are also assured that we are “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever;*” and that “*through water and the Holy Spirit you give your daughters and sons new birth, cleanse them from sin, and raise them to eternal life*” (ELW Holy Baptism). When we affirm our baptismal promises at Confirmation or on other occasions we give thanks that “*through water and the Holy Spirit you give us new birth, cleanse us from sin, and raise us to eternal life,*” as we pray that God

will continue to stir up in us “*the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles at Pentecost to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in languages they previously had no ability to speak, we believe that through the continued empowerment of God’s Holy Spirit we as the apostolic Church of this generation will be able to “*accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

- “Being the living Christ today means being filled with the same Spirit that filled Jesus. Jesus and his father are breathing the same breath, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the intimate communion that makes Jesus and his Father one ... It is this unity that Jesus wants to give us. That is the gift of his Holy Spirit. Living a spiritual life, therefore, means living in the same communion with the Father as Jesus did, and thus making God present in the world.” – Henri Nouwen.

While I was glad that we were able to reunite our lost and frightened Japanese visitors with their tour party on that day in Niagara Falls, I realized how limited I was in being able to communicate with them. Like the disciples at Pentecost, I did not and do not have the ability to share anything from simple directions to God’s liberating word with people whose language differs from mine; it is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that any of us are able to accomplish the task the Lord continues to set before us: “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.*” (ELW Hymn 729). May we remain committed to trust in God’s gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might continue to be the community of God’s people who go forth to proclaim to all people the message of God’s loving grace so that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*”

Amen.