

Day of Pentecost - Sunday, June 5, 2022  
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

What kind of visions does the Spirit give? What are the dreams given to old men, what word from God do young women speak, how are a slave's words set on fire and driven by the wind, driven by the Spirit, to break down walls and set the oppressed free?

I'm sitting at a table by a window at the Forks; clicking at the keyboard, making a sermon. There are two people just off to the right of me and I can't help but listen in while they talk. It's a lively conversation and their hands are waving everywhere. This one over here, she is speaking English most of the time, but sometimes seems to switch to another language. This one over here, he's speaking only a language I don't recognize with no English at all thrown in, but I don't think it's that same different language she speaks half the time. It's entirely possible that right next to me there are two people happily chatting away in three languages.

There's a woman two tables away whose skin is a different tone than mine, and I'm guessing that some time in her life or her parents' life or her grandparents' or further back, there was a willing or unwilling move from a place that's so different than the place my own people came from a few generations ago.

Most of us come from somewhere else, but there are people who have been on this land, right where we stand, for thousands and thousands of years, and a few of those young ones, maybe high school age, are sitting and laughing just through the doors into the next room.

And as I rode the bus from Epiphany to the Forks, I looked down the length of the bus and saw about twenty people sitting there, and one of those people was the other white person on the bus.

Remember that story we heard a moment or two ago? All the people of the earth had one language and all the same words and they came to one place and said, “Let’s make bricks, let’s make a tower, let’s make a name for ourselves right here, where we’re safe, and familiar, and it’s just us, because we don’t want to be scattered all over the earth.” And God came down and said, “Well that’s not right. Who knows what people will do when they think they should all be the same?” So God made them speak all these languages, and God sent them away from that tower where they tried to hang on to their one language and the same words, and God sent them to become languages and nations and colours and lands all over the world. It was just God’s way of making the world that God wants, where there are people all over the place and they’re different with lots of words and languages and lands and shades and ways of being.

It’s like there was this place where everyone was the same, and they built a tower as a great monument to their sameness, and God came down and said “that’s not right.” So God scattered the people, and a bunch of them ended up on the bus travelling up the southwest Transitway heading for downtown Winnipeg, and some of them came from somewhere else in the city and ended up in a place at the Forks Market laughing and eating and sipping coffee, and two of them spoke a few different languages back and forth, and in the corner of the room a pastor of a very light shade sat there writing about our story, where God makes the world look like a bus full of people, or a market, or a parade with a rainbow of colours and peoples, at the intersection of two rivers where people from all over have been meeting for thousands of years.

Diversity is not punishment. Diversity is not a problem. It’s just the way God wants the world to be.

We heard another story about languages and diversity today. As the story goes there are people gathered from every nation under heaven and living in one place. They come with all these languages that had been scattered all over the world, like in that story we heard before, but then a wind called the Holy Spirit blows through the place, and the fire of the Holy Spirit settles there, and suddenly all those languages are spoken and heard and understood.

And did you notice? They don't end up being the same. The Holy Spirit doesn't take people with all those languages and nations and lands and ways of being, and make them the same. Instead, they end up understanding things they couldn't understand before. They're different, they stay different, but they end up understanding people they hadn't understood before, because that's what the Holy Spirit does. That's the Holy Spirit of the one who made a rich and varied world; that's the Holy Spirit of Jesus who stepped across barriers and rose from the dead to tear those barriers down...that's what that Holy Spirit does.

There are some of you here and online here who speak two or three or more languages, either because you were born in a place where all those languages just kind of swirled around everywhere and you soaked them up, or because you worked hard to study and make mistakes and start to understand, and now it just comes more or less naturally. If that's you or someone you know, you know that that is a gift; a gift of Pentecost that says that people who couldn't understand one another can understand now. A gift that opens up so many different worlds that we share; different worlds that are themselves gifts from God. A gift of Pentecost, a miracle of speaking and hearing. And this gift reminds us of the gift of the Spirit that breaks down walls and brings people together.

And now I've got a small confession to make. You know that couple who I thought were carrying on a conversation in two or three different languages? After I'd sat tapping away at my keyboard for half an hour it suddenly dawned on me that I now understood everything they were saying. But it wasn't because I suddenly found myself able to understand two extra languages. It was because they were speaking English that whole time. It's just that one spoke with an accent that my ears couldn't hear at first, and at a speed I couldn't follow. So I just kind of assumed... But as they spoke my ears opened up, and my assumptions and expectations and understandings changed. It's like there was this wind that blew through that room, and tongues of fire came and rested on the heads of those two, and the Spirit of God worked a miracle of speaking and a miracle of hearing so that I could understand the ones I thought I couldn't understand.

That was a gift. But the fact is, and maybe this really matters as much, that there are people who speak the same language with the same accent and who come from the same place and know all the same words and they can't understand each other at all. That might just be the hardest thing. We go to the same churches and schools and stores and concerts; we sit at the same tables in the same dining rooms together, we cheer for the same teams, we share the same wishes to love and be loved.... But we can still be a society where whiteness holds most of the power, or we break up over differences of language; we divide ourselves over convoys and COVID or insist that there is only one way for people to share the gift of love. Or we just get trapped in old grudges that we won't let go. We speak the same language. And sometimes we just won't understand. Or even try to understand.

The miracle of Pentecost might not be the miracle of people suddenly able to speak languages they had not known before. The miracle is that God's Holy Spirit is at work to make us understand each other, so that we can see and hear and tell and act out the good news of our God who raises life from death and breaks down walls that divide.

That's the kind of vision that the Holy Spirit gives. Those are the dreams given to old men, and the word from the Lord spoken by young women who prophesy. Those are a free person's words and a slave's words; words that are set on fire and driven by the wind, driven by the Spirit, words that break down walls and set the oppressed free. Words that we are sent into the world to share...words of a God who gives life.

Listen for the wind of the Spirit and watch for flickers of light. Even the littlest signs of people brought together, and being different together, and understanding, even just trying to understand. That's the wind and the fire of the Holy Spirit: setting us free, healing us, mending the world.

AMEN.