PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

June 5, 2022

*“Fresh Wind of the Spirit”* Acts 2:1-21

The next time you get a chance, and you are at your computer, Google the word “Pentecost.” Do it in the “images” mode. What you will get are amazing and wonderful paintings of this chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. It is a highly visual passage and so many artists from around the world and throughout the ages have depicted it.

You and I, as we hear the passage read, smile in recognition of the wonderous thing that happened among the people on that morning—each person hearing their native language spoken, each being able to communicate clearly. It is an amazing feat of the Spirit, but there is more to it and the excitement and the movement that is a purely visual rendering may cause us to miss.

Specifically: before that moment, before the Spirit swept through them, most of the people in Jerusalem at that time would have spoken Greek. This was the language of commerce and the language of the Roman military for much of the early imperial period.

This is an important point to remember: that the people who first heard and experienced the descent of the Holy Spirit were *not* given a *spiritual* language. Neither were they given a *common* language. They already had that. They had the language of *the empire that occupied them*.

If we look again at the passage, we notice that the people who were moved by the Spirit to speak their native language were not pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Festival of Shavuot, the festival of the week—this is the way most people explain the multitude of languages spoken that morning.

However, if you look again at the passage, it says they were people who lived there. So, they must have been immigrants from those other places, where those languages were spoken. Indeed, when look again at the names of the places those languages came from we see that the people who were given the gift of understanding were people from the other parts of the world occupied by the Roman empire.

What the Spirit did on that morning was that it allowed people whose linguistic and cultural identity had been “homogenized” to reclaim their native voice. It allowed them to recapture the dignity and nuance of expression that is inherent in the languages with which they had fluency, that is their first language.

Here in Hawaii, we know this story very well. We have many stories about children being scolded or punished for speaking Hawaiian…or anything other than English. Most of us think back on those days with justified anger. And we cringe as we imagine the embarrassment, sadness, and confusion this must have produced.

In recent years, there have also been a great many stories in the news about the Native American children who were forcibly taken away from their families to be “assimilated” in American and Canadian schools that taught them exclusively in English.

Once again, removing their native language was among the most effective ways of destroying their ethnic and cultural identity.

On that first Pentecost morning, giving back the ability for people to speak in their native language with complete understanding was an amazing and important way of blessing the differences between those first peoples. It was a way of declaring that difference among peoples is not a deterrent to human community, or something to be destroyed. Indeed, the surprise among the people on that first Pentecost must have also been a source of joy, too.

What we see in that moment of understanding and diversity is God’s own celebration of variety. More importantly, it was an affirmation that difference need not be a barrier to unity.

In bringing the gift of understanding *in their native languages*, the Spirit was also bringing them something much greater. This was no less than the sign that God’s reign was immanent, and that this reign’s goal is ultimately to release people from the bonds of empire—even the Roman Empire.

We know this because we are told that the moment the people were able to communicate with each other, they began to proclaim “*God’s deeds of power”* [v. 11] –no one was shouting for Caesar.

We also know this because of the passage upon which Peter chose to base his sermon. He quotes a passage from the Book of Joel, which was written when Israel was occupied by another empire, and as part of the same prophecy Joel proclaimed, *“I will remove the northern army far from you, and drive it into a parched and desolate land.”* [Joel 2:20]

So, Peter must also be remembering and communicating those promises of liberation, and he was doing it to a people who had been held captive for far too long. This domination by the needs of empire, over and against the needs and rights of the dignity and freedom of the people, is more than a call to political overthrow.

More than anything else, it is a call to the faithful to recognize and fully allow the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. What the Spirit’s work on that first Pentecost morning allowed the people to do—and what it still calls *us* to do—is to *be* freed; freed to be *faithful* to God and only God. Which is to say: we are freed so that we may speak to one another in ways that heal and make whole; in ways that communicate truth and justice; in ways that are filled with honor and respect for one another—even when we are not speaking the same language.

To have been given the gift of being able to communicate in their native language with perfect understanding, the Spirit was pointing to the end of the domination of empire—in that instance, the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, there are more empires that continue to rise, bringing with them their own language. Often, we find ourselves being held captive to a language that is not our own—which is to say: a way of *being* that is not really our own.

The best example I could think of are the income tax forms we fill out every year. Those forms are all written in a language that is English, but also highly bureaucratic. What this means is that it has a whole set of internal references with which few of us are familiar. However, to fill out those forms, we have to conform to that language.

Just think what it would be like if we all got *stuck* in that way of communicating. Not being bureaucrats, most of us would not be very good at it. But more importantly, it would not *serve* our everyday needs in the way that our regular way of speaking does.

Well, here we are some two thousand years later, and what we find is that this message is still for us. Empire is still with us—the *language* of empire continues to hold us to its standard.

It is like the scoffers in the passage that we heard this morning, the ones who say the people touched by the Spirit are drunk. They do not see the miracle of recognition and reconciliation that has happened right in front of them. They do not see the joy and the relief of the people as they are drawn closer to one another through the ability to communicate.

Most of all, they are not able to hear or understand the people who are filled with the Spirit as they proclaim the mighty acts of God—the ways in which God is dismantling yet another obstacle to peace and understanding among people.

When people find a language, *their* language so that they may adequately describe and communicate to others *their* experience of their lives, their humanity it is like having a new language, it is like a new language is being spoken, and very often the ones speaking in these new tones will find it difficult to find an audience that is willing to take the time to hear them and understand what they are saying.

Think of the many times in our own lifetime when this has happened; the many movements we have witnessed: the Women’s’ Liberation Movement, the Black Pride Movement (which is now known largely as Black Lives Matter), the Gay Pride Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Justice for Palestine Movement, and many others.

With each movement we had to make room in our individual and communal lexicons to accommodate and include the experience of these people before we could *hear* them. We had to let go of the only language we knew—the language of the dominant group—and that was difficult because first we had to let down our barriers of fear and resentment that a different perspective often provokes. Indeed, there are at least a couple of movements in that short list with which we still have trouble hearing.

This is what it means to be filled with the Spirit: it is to be confronted by God’s own ways and God’s own love for the world and all of its people, and it is to be asked to make a choice.

Yes, the Roman Empire did fall and is no more. However, many other empires have risen and fallen since. We live with them in every age, and in every age we are given the opportunity to turn away, or to listen, to discern, to listen for understanding among the people whom God has given a voice, new breathe to tell us about who they are in their own language.

That is what we are celebrating this morning: the birthday of the church, the descent of the Holy Spirit—which is the beginning of the end of all empires save one: *God’s, God’s* sovereignty here on earth, in the hearts and minds of every person, every spirit that longs for the fresh wind of the Spirit to blow through their life; blowing out and away all that stands between people, all that is an obstacle to justice and equality, all that stands against our unity.

Yes, the Spirit has been blowing through our lives for a long while now and we have not yet seen the fulfillment of its promise. However, we continue to remember and tell this story because this is the promise that has been made to us. And because God’s promises are good, we can still have hope even as we turn our faces toward the new breeze that is blowing and welcome the Spirit.

Friends, I pray that we do so gladly, expectantly, and hopefully. Amen.