

I

A few years ago I had the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem with a group of pastors. Our guide was a Palestinian Christian who had many years of experience leading English-speaking tour groups from across the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and beyond. Although his native tongue was Arabic, his command of English was impeccable.

One afternoon, our group had the opportunity to stand atop the Mount of Olives and take in that incredible view of the Old City. I happened to be standing next to our guide, and pointing to an object on the far horizon, I asked him, “What’s that yonder?”

He looked at me quizzically and said, “Yonder? What is this word yonder?”

And I smiled and I said, “It’s the Texan English word for “over there.”

II

Language is one of the ways in which we human beings claim identity. Whether we’re aware of it or not, the vocabulary that we use, the accent with which we speak, the shorthand and slang that we use or don’t use – all of that is a part of how we identify with a particular group.

Language, of course, is very noticeable along geographic or regional lines. Here in the South, in the birthplace of CocaCola, we know that all

carbonated soft drinks are Cokes. But my college roommate, who was raised in the Chicago suburbs, looked at me like I was insane the first time I asked him what kind of Cokes he would like me to get from the store, because in his context, Coke is but one variety of a drink called pop.

Language cuts across generational lines. Once, when I was with my kids at the water park, my cell phone accidentally got wet, and I needed to call my wife to let her know that we would be late getting home. So I approached one of the teenage employees and asked where I might find a payphone, he looked at me and said, “What’s a payphone?”

Even churches have their own language and dialect. In our church, we have words like session and presbytery that in other church traditions are words like vestry and diocese or council and conference.

As human beings, language is one of the ways in which we identify to which tribe we belong.

And that brings us to our story for today.

III

This spring and summer, we are reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts. Last week, as we finished chapter 1, we read that to that point in history, the sum total of Christians in the world was 120 people. And most, if not all of them, were from the same geographic region of the land

of Israel – a small string of fishing villages nestled along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

In fact, after Jesus' arrest, when he was taken to the home of the high priest in Jerusalem, Peter followed at a distance and was lurking in the courtyard to see what would happen, when one of the people there pointed at him and said, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean."

I don't think it was Peter's clothing that gave him away as a Galilean. I don't think he was wearing his Capernaum High School class ring. I think it was Peter's language – his vocabulary and accent – that enabled that stranger to accurately identify his home region, even though Peter denied it.

And so when we come to our story today, it's the annual spring holiday held 50 days after Passover known as Pentecost, and Jews from all over the world have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to mark the holiday. Meanwhile, in a house across town, 120 people, most of whom are Galileans who have come to believe that Jesus is the long-awaited and long-promised Messiah, are waiting as Jesus instructed them to do when they watched him ascend into heaven ten days prior.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Acts 2:1-21.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a

sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all
flesh,*

*and your sons and your daughters
shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream
dreams.*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and
women,*

*in those days I will pour out my
Spirit;*

and they shall prophesy.

*And I will show portents in the heaven
above*

*and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,*

*before the coming of the Lord's
great and glorious day.*

*Then everyone who calls on the name of
the Lord shall be saved.'*

This is the Word of God for the
people of God. Thanks be to God.

The way in which we speak
indicates something about where we're
from and to whom we belong.

And yet here are these Galileans,
who, as far as we know, have no formal
education or advanced training in

linguistics, yet suddenly they are able to
speak in perfect dialect all these
different languages with all of the
appropriate idioms and accents to boot.

What does it mean? they asked.

That's a question that the church
has been wrestling with for a very long
time. It's an interesting story, sure. But
what does it mean?

I think one clue can be found in
an earlier story in the bible. Much
earlier. As in, all the way Genesis,
almost back to the very beginning, to
chapter 12. In Genesis 12, we read that
one day, out of the clear blue sky, God
spoke to this childless, aging couple
name Abraham and Sarah and God said,
in Ryan's paraphrase of the Hebrew, "I
am going to make of you a great nation.
I am going to bless you, so that in and
through you, all of the families of the
earth will be blessed."

I believe that if there's such thing
as a thesis statement to the biblical
story, if there's such thing as a mission
statement that describes what God is up
to in the world, it's right there. God's
intention, God's purpose, God's dream,
is for the blessing of all the families of
the earth.

And in God's own mysterious
providence, rather than just speaking
that blessing into being, God chooses to
work out God's purposes in and through
this one family and their descendants –
not because Abraham and Sarah are
somehow more holy or faithful than any
other couple, but simply because out of

God's electing grace, God chose them to be the instruments of God's mission in the world.

Theologians call this the scandal of particularity. The scandal that God would choose a particular couple, a particular family, a particular tribe, or in the case of our story from Acts, this little group of 120 Galileans, to be the instruments of God's stated mission of blessing all the families of the earth – to be the ones who begin to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, and then out to Judea, and then into Samaria, and indeed, out to the ends of the earth.

So in one sense, this story about Pentecost is about God doing a new miraculous thing. And you can even hear in the text how Luke struggles to describe it – something like tongues of fire, but not exactly, something like the sound of a violent wind, but not quite. God moves in mysterious ways.

But God also moves in consistent ways. The events of that Pentecost day, 50 days after Christ's resurrection and 10 days after his ascension, are consistent with the God who, out of God's amazing grace, chooses particular people, particular families, particular tribes, particular groups, to be the ones who will be the agents of God's intended blessing of all the families of the earth.

IV

And here's where you come in, my friend. God has called you to be a

part of what God is doing in the world. Yes, you.

Not because you're smarter or stronger or more faithful than anyone else. That's not how God operates. God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called.

Those 120 Galileans, most of them likely illiterate, did not spend years studying all the languages of the known world and how to pronounce every idiom and local phrase. No, when the time was right, God equipped them with everything they needed to be a part of what God is doing in the world.

And that's how God works with you, my friend. You are sufficient, exactly as you are, exactly where you are. You have everything you need to be a part of what God is doing in the world, because God always equips those whom God has called.

My friend, God knows a word before it is on your tongue. God discerns your thoughts from far away. God knows everything about you – all your talents, and all your deficits – all your good qualities – and all the things you don't like about yourself – all of your triumphs, and all of your failures. God knows it all, and God says, I have called you and claimed you and marked you with the gift of my Holy Spirit. You will be my witness. You will be the agent of my blessing of all the families of the earth.

V

As I looked carefully at the story again this week, I noticed something I hadn't seen before. Everyone there that day was from the same religious group. Even though they spoke different languages and hailed from different parts of the world, they all belonged to the same tribe.

But as we will see as we continue to read through Acts, the Holy Spirit will not be confined to any one group. The Holy Spirit blows where it will, and as we read, we'll discover that the Spirit will fall on non-Jews, or as the text calls them, Gentiles, as well.

And it will take awhile for the early church to come to terms with that idea. It's one thing to claim that the grace of God is freely available to all, regardless of the boundaries of language or geography or any other identity marker – it's another thing to live it out.

And so as we in our time mark this Pentecost day, as we endure this season of bitter enmity and division in our nation, in our communities, even in our own families, let us remember that God's mission in the world, God's purpose, is for the blessing of all the families of the earth, and God has called us, the church, the body of Christ, to be the instruments of that blessing.

God desires to bless all the families of the earth. The ones who worship like us, and the ones who don't, and the ones who don't worship at all.

God desires to bless all the families of the earth. The ones who vote

like us, and the ones who don't, and the ones who don't vote at all.

God desires to bless all the families of the earth. The ones whose accent sounds like ours, and the ones whose accent doesn't, and the ones we can't understand at all.

God desires to bless all the families of the earth. In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

May we be faithful agents of the mission of blessing that God has entrusted to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.