

Sermon-Tongues on Fire

Scripture: Acts 2:1-13

Sunday, June 20, 2021

Today we are going to look at signs and wonders associated with the day of Pentecost. In the very first chapter of Acts, we saw how God had prepared his disciples for this day. Jesus made sure his disciples had first hand knowledge about all the essentials about Himself including his rising from the death. He made sure to jog their memory about what He had taught them about the Kingdom of God and finally He gave them their assignment for after he had physically left them. Then he rose to heaven again in a manner that they could testify to first-hand. Now post ascension, his disciples knew “what” to do. They just needed the power to do it. Even there, Jesus had promised his disciples the special power they would need to accomplish their assigned mission. On the day of Pentecost this empowerment promise of Jesus was fulfilled. This is how it all went down.

Firstly, the action. It starts out with the sound of a fierce wind like a hurricane filling the room. Then something like “a tongue of fire” came into the room, separated into smaller individual “tongues of fire” and rested on each person in the room. When that happened, each disciple was filled with the Holy Spirit and started speaking in different languages as the Spirit of God enabled them to do so. Before we move on I just want to point out some similarities between these images of wind and fire in this passage with those in the Old Testament. The most well known example of a spectacular fire is when God appeared to His people at Mt Sinai as the law was given to the people. At that time in Ex 24:17 it says the appearance of God was like a devouring fire. Remind the clock a but and you might remember that when Moses first encountered God too it was in the form of a fire, in the burning bush that did not burn.

There is wind imagery as well in the Old Testament. In Job 38:1 God appears to Job out of a whirlwind. Right at the beginning in Genesis, the Spirit of God was described as hovering over the waters like a wind, when God was blowing His spirit into Adam's nostrils, the imagery is certainly of wind. On the other side of the Bible, even in the Gospel of John, he describes God's spirit with the metaphor of the wind that blows wherever it wants to in ways that we cannot predict.

So the visuals at Pentecost of both wind and fire would clearly have been understood by God's people as representing the presence of God in the midst of the people. But as we wrap up the symbolic aspects of the imagery here, I also want to point out the connections here to the imagery at Jesus' baptism. If you remember when Jesus was baptized, the spirit of God descended on him like a "dove". In our case the wind and fire come together and gets shaped into something like a tongue which then separates into individual tongues that fly and rest over the heads of each person gathered a bit like a bird. All of this would make it clear that the imagery of the signs of the day of Pentecost were pointing to God's presence coming onto Jesus' disciples in a way that paralleled God's spirit coming on to Jesus at His baptism and the power His disciples would get through all of this was the power of speaking in a special way.

So what's the speaking power that the disciples received? Well, we are told that they start speaking about the "wonders of God" in all kinds of different languages. Let's meditate on the content of their speaking first. Now I am speaking from my gut and this is not described in our passage but I am sure they acknowledged the amazing wonders of God's creation, the wonders of God's goodness, the wonders of His love and at that point they would also have been ready to speak of the wonders of God's great salvation plan for the world. Now that we have a bit more content at the top of our minds when we think of the phrase, the wonders of God let's look at the next part of the miracle.

All the disciples also start communicating all these things in languages they never knew before. We are told that as these disciples were being inspired to declare the wonderful works of God somehow they rushed out to where all the people were gathered. And they start speaking in the native languages or the heart languages of the people around them.

What the people hearing all this would have experienced is something that is hard to explain. But it reminds me of the time when I had gone to Vietnam on a mission trip. The very first day when we arrived, they were singing a chorus in Vietnamese that I recognized. It was the chorus “This is the day” and I am sure many of you will be familiar with it as well. I was so struck by it that I asked them to teach me the song in Vietnamese. And I encouraged by American friends who are very vary of venturing into another language to learn it with me. They finally did and on the last day, at a farewell party they had for us on a boat, we sang “This is the Day” back to them in Vietnamese. You should have seen their faces light up. The Americans who had connected with them in the past had never tried to speak their language before. Now many in our audience could understand and speak English. So we could have just sang an English song to them and they would have understood us well. But understanding the meaning of what someone is saying to you is not the same as touching their heart, right? When we same to them in Vietnamese it touched their heart and we could see it in their faces. It is an experience I will never forget.

I am sure that that look we got that day was a little glimpse into what these Jews born in different nations with different mother tongues would have experienced in verse 6-8, Let me read it to you. ***“When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”***

When you are speaking to someone who grew up in a different country there are many communication barriers. If they speak another language, the words and sounds itself are different. If you get a translation of the words, you still may not understand what is said because every language has its phrases from cultural references that don't make sense in translation. For example, if you translate the phrase, "you hit it out of the park" it will make no sense to someone from a country that is not familiar with baseball. They may wonder what park you are talking about and whether hitting it out of that place is a good thing or a bad thing. 😊 Then there are the phrases that when you hear it, brings back childhood memories. For example, if you tell me "Praise be to God" I will understand it perfectly. But there is another phrase, "Daivathinu sthotrum" which means the same thing but it is in my mother tongue, Malayalam. The phrase "daivathinu sthotrum" brings back childhood memories. It connects to me in a way that "Praise be to God" does not.

Now that is what is happening on the day of Pentecost. These disciples who had the tongues of fire rest on their heads were able to communicate the "wonders of God" in the heart language of their listeners. The listeners heard their native tongues being spoken in a different country, by people who did not know anything about their language. And so those words spoken would have hit their listeners hard and got stuck deep inside of them.

This is how God wants to speak to anybody He speaks to. He wants to speak to us in our heart language. And the miracle of Pentecost was that God was able to channel this ability to his disciples, so that now **they** were able to speak to the Jews born in faraway countries in their respective heart languages.

Looking at the other side of this, I want to point something out about the crowds there. So we are told that there was a massive crowd in Jerusalem at the time from the different countries. Why were they in Jerusalem? They were there to celebrate the

festival of Pentecost. This was originally the harvest festival and this was the time they would bring their first fruits from their wheat harvest. Later on, it also became a celebration of the giving of the Law of Moses. So it was a celebration of harvest and a celebration of the giving of the law. Now this is also the time of year when the weather was the nicest in Jerusalem and because of that this was the festival that drew the biggest crowds into Jerusalem. More even than Passover. So the timing for this language miracle was just perfect. Kind of like people from all over the world coming to the US for the Olympics and hearing the Americans speak in the native languages of all those who can come in. Wouldn't that be a shocker? (●'∩'●)

But I would also say this about the crowd. This was also one of the greatest gatherings of persons of peace in any one place in the history of the Christian faith. Because for many, as they heard the wonders of God shared in their heart language, they wanted to seriously explore what that miracle meant for their lives. They had become open to hearing what Jesus' disciples had to say and be obedient to it. We will look at the people's reactions some more in a later sermon.

On the other hand we are talking about a crowd. And a crowd has all kinds of people. While some people reacted to this miracle with great curiosity and openness, others reacted differently. Some we are told, the "impossible skeptics" were not moved even when they heard a message in their heart language. Their response to all that they saw and heard was simply to make fun of the disciples and ridicule them. They will always be the skeptics, no matter how great a miracle performed in front of them.

When you look at this section of the day of Pentecost, there are three big observations that I want to bring to your attention.

Firstly, when you are filled with the power of God, God will give you the capacity to connect at the heart level with the person you are working with. This is a Christ ambassador's most important super power. I want to call this power having your

“tongue on fire”. Not the kind like when you eat spicy food at our house 😊 No the kind of fire in which when you speak, you are reaching the heart language of your listener in a way that takes them by surprise. When you can make this kind of connection, that’s Acts 1:8 coming true for you. Now you don’t need to be speaking to someone who has a different native tongue to be a witness. Even someone you are speaking to, who shares a common language with you, may not connect with you at the heart level for whatever reason. God’s power will enable you to make that deep heart connection as you pray and ask God to give you the opportunities. This is the miracle of Pentecost, the miracle of communication that Christ has promised everyone of his disciples.

Secondly, when the disciples had that incredible spirit come upon them, if they had stayed in the room they were in, nothing spectacular would have happened. But as this power descended on them they were also moved to go where the people were. It most likely was the temple grounds. And as they were speaking verse 6 tells us that **“a crowd came together in bewilderment because each one heard their own language being spoken”**. In other words, the disciples who had just been inspired and empowered did not sit in the upper room but rushed out into the streets. And God made sure that the people who needed to hear them were drawn to the disciples in a huge crowd. I have been thinking about this quite a bit. When you have the inspiration and power of God what was the natural thing to do? Get out and meet some people. Because you are ready to be used by God to witness to some people. Don’t worry who you will encounter. That is God’s problem. He will draw people when you are ready for it. Our job it to pray for a surge of God’s spirit activity in us and we are to simply obey and go out and meet the people we are supposed to meet.

Finally, I just want to bring to your attention that even when there was this incredible miracle taking place in front of the people there were skeptics who would not be moved. This can get frustrating. You think you have done all you can and the person you

are trying to connect to is simply not moved. Well, that shows you how hard the human heart is. But it is also encouraging to know that when people don't respond to you, you are not the first person this is happening to. Yesterday I went for a prayer walk with two of my friends. And it was really exciting because God opened up the opportunity for us to pray for an individual. I asked him if he wanted prayer. He said yes and came out. We held hands in a circle and prayed and it was great. But then we went ahead and saw another guy. I went and asked him if we could pray for him. He said no thanks. I am glad for this example as well, because it was a chance to teach my mentees first hand that there will be skeptics and people who will reject even an unconditional offer of a prayer of blessing over them. They will be skeptics in our lives, because there were skeptics even on the day of Pentecost. There were skeptics even when Jesus Christ did the sharing in person. There will be skeptics till the end of time. But our job is to sow broadly, even over the skeptics. Knowing that those whom God has prepared are there somewhere in the mix. And they will take the message and bear incredible amounts of fruit and move the world closer to Christ's return.

My hope is that this meditation on this events of the morning of day of Pentecost inspires us to seek an out a great outpouring of God's spirit on us so that we too will be moved to go seek people out, speak like our tongues are on fire and make that heart level connection. And may no skeptic stop us from accomplishing God's mission that has been entrusted to each one of us. Let us pray.