

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ “ ‘In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

*¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.*

*²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.*

*²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ (Acts 2:1-21)*

The Wonders of God in Our Own Language

Do words ever fail you? Maybe you were on vacation and you saw something so cool that you wanted to tell everybody about it. But when you tried, you just couldn't make them feel the way you did when you saw it. You just didn't have words to do it justice. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever wondered if you're getting your point across? If you find yourself constantly asking, "You know?" it might show that you have doubts about how effective your communication really is. Imagine how much harder it is when you try to do it in a foreign language. When I was in the army, I went to a special school in Munich where I spent six weeks studying German all day long and then I lived with a German family at night. One Saturday, they had a man come over to cut down a tree on their property. This man brought along his two children. They were maybe kindergarteners, so all they spoke was German. I asked them why their dad was there. These two little kids explained to me in very clear, idiomatic German that he was there to cut down a tree. You know what impressed me? Those little kids knew how to say that in German and I didn't. That's one of the hard things about learning a foreign language. You have these grown up thoughts but you can only talk like a kindergartner. It's frustrating.

Today is the Festival of Pentecost. In our reading from the book of Acts we heard about the miracle God did on the first New Testament day of Pentecost. He sent the Holy Spirit onto the apostles in power and they went out and spoke in languages they had never learned – and not just one. Jerusalem was filled with Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world. Luke lists at least fifteen different places they were from. And the people said, **“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”** Their own languages. Now, English wasn’t spoken in any of those fifteen places the people were from. But the miracle of Pentecost does continue right up until today. We have the same blessing those people did almost two thousand years ago: **the wonders of God in our own language!**

I.

That’s always a miracle! Today, God doesn’t give us the ability to speak a foreign language without studying it. It takes a lot of work. But even if we’re talking just about English, it really is amazing that we can communicate at all. How much of what I perceive can I share with you? You’ve probably heard the old psych question, “How do you describe the color blue to a person who was born blind?” Well, have you ever wondered whether you and I really see the same color? What if the color I see as blue, you really see as the color I call red? How would we know, since we both point to the same thing and say, “blue”? My point is, it’s hard for me to share with you what I experience. It’s hard for you to communicate to me what you feel and think. Sometimes people talk past each other they can’t see that they’re really saying the same thing. Sometimes people think they agree because they use similar words, but really they don’t.

Well, if it’s so hard for us to explain our thoughts and feelings to each other, how can God possibly communicate with us? Explaining God’s thoughts is like trying to explain color to a person who has never seen anything. It’s worse than that. It’s like trying to explain Shakespeare to your dog. All your dog knows is that you’re talking to it and it likes the attention. It doesn’t understand why you like or don’t like *Hamlet*.

So God poured the Holy Spirit out on the apostles at Pentecost. In an instant, he enabled those men to speak in languages that it should have taken them years to learn. And then he enabled them to proclaim the wonders of God in those languages. That is the greater miracle of this text, a miracle that God is still doing today. Every time that you hear that Jesus saved you, you are hearing the greatest wonder of God in your own language. God knelt down to our level, like a parent getting down on their knees and looking a five-year-old in the eyes and explaining to them before they have surgery that they’re taking them to the doctor for their good and that they will be there when that child comes out. The mighty Maker of the universe gets down on his knees and speaks to us in our own language – in our case in English – so that we know the love he has shown us in Christ even when all that God is doing in our lives is baffling to our tiny brains.

God’s thoughts are beyond human understanding. So it’s a miracle that God found a way to communicate to us the message that he has been working to save us since before time began and that he has controlled all things so that Jesus would be born and live and die and rise again. It’s one of God’s greatest works that he has made it possible for us human beings to grasp that Jesus died and paid for our sins and rose for our forgiveness and that he ascended into heaven to run all things for our good until he comes back. God created those words so that our limited minds could grasp his purpose, even if we have questions about it that we’ll never understand on this earth and may not even in heaven.

But the miracle is greater than just our understanding. God reached into the hearts of sinners, of rebels who were born hating him and convinced us that he did all that for us. God overcame our fear and our hatred and our anger and our lust and made us his children. He did all that through the Gospel. That Word of God conquers our hearts. It changes the way we think and view this world.

God gave the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to enable the disciples to proclaim the gospel and to work through that gospel to save us. And God gave the Holy Spirit so that through those apostles, he could give us his word. When this event happened, the New Testament wasn’t even started yet. The Old Testament was there, but St. Paul says that a veil covered the hearts of the Jews so that they didn’t understand that it was all about Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ apostles wrote and gathered and authenticated the New Testament Scriptures which tell us what God was saying in the Old Testament. Those Scriptures tell us all we can know about God. He works through them – not in Greek or Hebrew or Spanish or German, at least not for us. He does it for you and me in English, the language of our hearts and minds. Because he does, we trust our Savior.

II.

Have you ever wondered what language we'll speak in heaven? Will we sing God's praises in Greek, the language that Acts was written in? Will we do it in Hebrew the language of the Old Testament? Or is there a language of heaven that we can't speak yet? I don't know, but I often tease the very German pastors in our synod that they'll have to learn Polish to be allowed into heaven. The gospel comes to us here, in this place, in English. So God gives us the blessing of Pentecost, **the wonders of God in our own language. That was always his plan!**

When all those Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, English would not exist for at least five hundred more years. The English that emerged in Great Britain at that time was so much more like German that we probably wouldn't understand a word of it. The English that the King James Bible was written in is a lot closer to ours. It comes from 1611, but it's still pretty hard for people to understand today. If the world is still here in 500 years, what will English be like? Would we understand it? Maybe not. But two thousand years ago, when God poured the Holy Spirit out on the disciples in Jerusalem, he knew all the twists and turns that English and every other language would ever take. He created a gospel that can be communicated to anybody in any culture in any age.

On that day of Pentecost, the crowd gathered because they had heard the rushing wind and then they heard all these languages and they asked a very Lutheran question. My seventh and eighth graders might think at first that it comes right out of the catechism. They asked, **"What does this mean?"** Peter stood up and told them. He said, **"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel."** Joel lived 800 years before this happened. But God showed him the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the New Testament Church. That tells us just how long God had been committed to this plan. The truth is, God didn't start it with Joel. Two thousand years before this happened, God told Abraham that through him all nations on earth would be blessed – they would hear the good news about Jesus. Reaching all the way back to the Garden of Eden, God promised that the Seed of the Woman, Jesus, would crush Satan's head and die in the process. Jesus died and rose and God sent that good news out into the world.

And part of God's eternal plan was us. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people came to faith. Who were they? Luke tells us they were Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism. So already then, God was reaching out from his Old Testament people to people like us. But the miracle of languages shows how much more the emphasis on people like us was going to grow. It was never enough for God that only Jews would believe. God always wanted you and me to come to faith. God always wanted the billions of Gentiles on this planet to hear the good news and believe it. God has worked through the centuries to give that message to us.

And God works through us to pass the message on to still others. Generation after generation of Christians teach their children to know Jesus. That's why we have a school and a high school. But that isn't the only way God passes this message on. Every generation of Christians also is called to share the gospel with the world. That means that right around us here at Peace, there is a mission field for us to work in. Many WELS churches today are planted in little towns in Michigan and Wisconsin and Minnesota where there are very few people for them to reach out to. But God has put us here. There are literally hundreds of thousands of people within a reasonable drive of our parking lot. God calls us to reach out to them.

Will we answer his call? Are we willing to commit ourselves to that work? To give of our time and our financial resources to operate our school and to reach out into our community? Are we personally willing to step up? Last week after church we introduced our first little toe in the outreach water: our greeter program. We asked you to sign up to be one of the people who just tries to make visitors feel welcome when they come to church. Did you sign up? If not, why not? There could be valid reasons not to. But if your reason is fear or laziness, that's sin. God calls us all to support the work as he has blessed us. That means giving a generous portion of what God gives you back. Are you generous with the Lord? If not, why not? Being stingy with God is sin.

Are we guilty of those sins? Don't we all have to admit we are, at least to some extent? That's why Jesus came. To die and pay for our sins: our stinginess with God, our laziness about his work, our fear of having to talk about the gospel. Jesus' blood has already washed all that sin away. We are forgiven now and forever. But as forgiven children of God, how do we say thank you? By giving back to God a part of the time and the money he has given to us. Let's make Peace a place that's full of members who give generously to the Lord so that the people around us here and around the world hear the message we have heard.

Joel saw the Holy Spirit poured out on the New Testament Church so that we could share that message. If you read through his prophecy, you realize that Joel was talking about the end of the world. He talks about signs in the sky and the moon being turned to blood before the great and glorious day of the Lord. Why does he talk about Pentecost and Judgment Day in the same breath? Because for God, they are in the same breath. Jesus left us just for a moment. And then he will return. While he's gone, the Spirit is working, gathering and collecting his people, sending his message out, changing hearts through the gospel he gave us. You and I have that gospel message. We know our Savior. Let's dedicate ourselves to doing the work of Pentecost, the work of spreading the good news throughout the world. Amen.