

Take a Deep Breath – Acts 2:1-21

The incident in our reading from Acts this morning has to rate as one of the five best-known events in the Bible, I think. Mention the word ‘Pentecost’ and just about everyone can make some kind of reference to this text, however fuzzy or vague the reference may be. Many if not most people would be able to say something about tongues of fire, and probably even people speaking in tongues, even if their recollection was not very specific about the who, and the when, and the where.

That’s one of the key problems with a “well known” text ... it’s so “well known” that there is lots that is known that isn’t in there, and often lots that’s in the text that isn’t known. Even the understanding of what the incident was about tends to get simplified and the details get confused as to what was actually happening. For example, when you think of this incident, do you picture a large group of people assembled, all jabbering away incoherently as if they were drunk? A chaotic scene with confusion reigning everywhere? If that’s the picture that comes to your mind, you are not alone. That is probably the most common view that people hold of this scene – and yet it is a picture that really doesn’t match the details.

First, how many were there and who were they? The “they” referred to as being “all together in one place” were the twelve apostles, Mathias having been just added to replace Judas. It was not a huge crowd of strangers upon whom the divided tongues of fire rested, it was the small, intimate group of Jesus’ closest followers. Even the crowd who assembled in response asked, “are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” And as to the jabbering away, it was no incoherent babbling that arose from these people newly filled with the Holy Spirit – they were speaking in languages that people from other nations could readily understand. It would appear that some of the apostles were even suddenly gifted with being multilingual, as the list of languages / nations – some 15 or so – is greater than the number of apostles! Moreover they were not just babbling, they were speaking about God’s deeds of power. This was not just chaotic holy noise that they were generating; the disciples were speaking in such a way as to tell anyone who had ears to hear and who would listen about God and what God had done.

This incident is for Luke the real beginning of the church. This was for him not some bizarre and curious event, but the starting point of the growth and expansion of the church throughout the whole known world. For Luke it was crucial to point out that the beginning of the church was not a people-event, but a God-event, an event in the holy city of Jerusalem from where the church would expand and grow throughout Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth like expanding ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown in.

And for Luke also the birth of the church was – and could only be – God-inspired, delivered with the arrival of the promised Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, supporter and sustainer, the Holy Spirit delivered as promised by God. Not in isolation, of course, not as a spontaneous and unconnected event, but as the sealing of the new covenant in Christ, the fulfillment of the promise made by the One who was himself the fulfillment of God’s promise of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

That’s not quite the picture of chaos that we tend to remember this incident as being, is it? Instead of an exotic and emotional room full of incoherent babbling we have orderly if excited descriptions of God’s reconciling deeds being conveyed in ways that people other than just the insiders could understand. It would seem that we might do well to reconsider whether this is a miracle of the tongue, or a miracle of the ear. This is not so much a story of speaking as it is of hearing. This is a story about the miracle of listening, for the devout Jews who gathered in response to the excitement not only heard about God’s powerful deeds, they listened to Peter’s

explanation. Peter went on in great detail to point out to the now-listening crowd what God had done in and through Jesus, and many repented and were baptized into the faith.

And so what a powerful model for the church this incident is ... and what a sadness that so much of the church that was founded in that moment has lost the model. Here we have a prototype of the Holy Spirit moving those who would constitute the body of Christ to reach out to peoples of other nations in such a way as they could hear, and listen, in such a way as to respect their culture, their language. The message of God's powerful deeds being proclaimed in such a way as others could actually hear it, and listen to it, and respond to it.

I suspect if we had asked the apostles on the day before this event if they would ever be able to proclaim God's goodness to other people in another language, the language of the listener, we would have received responses ranging from dumbfounded stares to vigorous vocal protests. Even if a few of them spoke a bit of other languages – which was actually quite possible given the multilingual nature of the area at the time – even if a few spoke a bit of some other languages, I'm pretty sure if we asked for a show of hands as to who spoke each of the fifteen or so languages listed here there would be few hands raised. And yet here on that day they are clearly fluent in those languages, fluent enough that native speakers could easily understand them, and apparently spoke them well enough that their thick Galilean accents didn't come through, for those hearing and understanding their own language were impressed.

How did this happen? Not from some quick three-day Rosetta stone CD. Not from some secret night classes in foreign languages. Their ability to speak – and be clearly understood – in these many languages came from the Holy Spirit, bringing to the apostles, to the very foundation of the early church, not only the ability but the desire to reach out to all peoples, not just to the Israelites. And it is important to recognize that this dramatic shift resulted in an invitation in a form that was meaningful to the foreigners – in their own language. The Holy Spirit did not let the apostles sit in their own little space hoping for others to notice and to join in, but instead inspired the newly-forming church to adapt and to reach out well beyond itself.

This need to adapt and reach out is still a foundational issue for the church today. People in churches don't like to change. Change is challenging and uncomfortable. Change is often frightening because it is so uncertain; and yet the irony is that the certainty of failing to change and the resulting slow decline into death should be so much more frightening and yet seems not to be. I'm watching with interest a local congregation – not one of ours – address the issue of potential change brought about by the retirement of their long-term minister. They are being helped through the process by a Transitional Minister – also not one of ours – who is doing an absolutely excellent job. He is following the book on Transitional Ministry to the letter, helping the congregation ask all the right questions as they seek to understand who God is calling them to be and who they might 'call' to lead them in that direction. They are only part way through that process, and while it is clear that they are approaching the critical question of whether they are prepared to make the kinds of changes they need to in order not only to stay alive but to thrive, it is also clear that they are not yet quite ready to answer that question fully.

We here at Central have faced similar questions, and continue to face them as we dive deeper into our redevelopment project. It is a challenging undertaking; right now it is challenging enough merely doing the political dances with the city and the church, but some days the prospect of the amount of work to be done in the near future is mind-boggling and overwhelming. I suspect if the apostles that day in Jerusalem had been asked if they were competent to take on the challenges they eventually faced they would also have experienced similar feelings of being overwhelmed. However, we have their experience of being renewed

and re-energized by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and we look to that model of renewing the church for our support and guidance as well.

Imagine how we might be like if we followed this model in Acts, and took a deep breath of the Holy Spirit. Imagine how, energized by the breath of fresh air and new life brought by the Holy Spirit we not only survive the coming temporary dislocation but use it to our and God's advantage. Can you see how people, just like the onlookers that day in Jerusalem, might gather around our open house meetings and temporary facilities, and hear us tell the story of how this congregation has been reaching out to the community in God's name for almost a hundred years now, and how much more we will be able to do so with better facilities? Can you picture in your mind how the excitement and enthusiasm of this small group of Christ's faithful can model – just like the apostles – a church that instead of focusing inward on themselves reaches out to others in ways that are meaningful and real to those around them? Consider how the church will blossom and flourish as we actually listen to the needs and wants of people outside the church, and then relate to them meaningful and hands-on answers of God's redeeming love for them? Consider the consequences of the church stopping talking like a small, exclusive band of Galileans and drawing upon the Holy Spirit told the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that people not only could hear but would stop to listen?

This is Pentecost Sunday, the day the church considers as the 'anniversary' of the birth of the church in that miracle in Jerusalem. It is followed by the whole Season of Pentecost, the time that stretches across the Summer and the Fall right up until the Church Year starts over again at Advent. What better time is there to reach back and touch the roots of the church's beginning, to hear once again that defining model of the Holy Spirit's action of helping the church adapt the message of God's power in Christ Jesus so that the whole world might hear, and understand, and listen, and respond? What better time to re-energize the spiritual gift of listening with which we have been blessed, that we might hear and follow the dreams and visions of a church upon which the Spirit has been poured?