

In Our Native Tongue

TEXT: Acts 2:1-8

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 28, 2023

When last we saw our heroes, they were gawking at the clouds as Jesus was taken up into heaven. And then they went back to Jerusalem because Jesus had told them to stay there to await the Baptism with the Holy Spirit, whatever that was. That was ten days prior to the events in today's reading.

But there was another more practical reason that staying in Jerusalem made sense. Ten days after Jesus' ascension was the Jewish Feast of Shavuot. They had come to Jerusalem for Passover, which was the festival in the background during Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. They had mostly stayed in the city for 40 days after that, trying to absorb what had happened, taking note of all of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, and looking for answers about what to do next.

As long as the Temple stood, Jews from all over the world were expected to go to Jerusalem for major feast days, so there was hardly any point in traveling back home after Jesus' ascension only to come back in ten days' time for Shavuot.

The word "Shavuot" means "weeks," and the festival is sometimes called the Feast of Weeks because it marked seven weeks—49 days—after Passover. While it began as a harvest festival, by the fourth century BCE, Shavuot had also come to mark God giving the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And, just like we celebrate Easter after the 40-day period of Lent is over, so the single-day festival of Shavuot was celebrated on the fiftieth day. The word for 50, in Greek, is Pentecost.

The reason that you had "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" in Jerusalem here in Acts 2 is not just because Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city. It's because Jews everywhere were required to be there for the Pentecost celebration.

That's why everyone is gathered in one place, but that's also why talk of a rushing wind and appearances of tongues of fire are not as odd as you might think. It makes a direct literary tie back to Moses. If you go back to Exodus 19, as the Israelites arrive at Mt. Sinai and prepare to receive God's commandments, it sounds more like they were at the site of a volcano than a regular mountain.

Listen to Exodus 19:16-19: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder."

This was the prelude to receiving the Torah when Moses finally comes down that fiery, quaking mountain. And while I doubt those who were gathered in Jerusalem with Jesus' disciples were expecting a literal re-enactment, Luke—who most believe to be the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts—is reminding his readers of the significance of the day.

But the thing that gets everyone outside of the circle of Jesus' disciples to pay attention is not the wind or the tongues of flame. The thing that makes everyone turn their heads and ask what's going on is hearing a cacophony of language and then realizing that, even though the people in Jerusalem came from all over the known world—the Bible singles out and names thirteen different regions—they could each hear a Galilean follower of Jesus speaking in their own native language.

When setting the context for Jesus' life and ministry at the end of last year, we talked about the region of Galilee and how most people there were not literate even in their own language, let alone others. Maybe in

Rome or Corinth or other large cities people from Libya, Asia, Iran, Italy, and Greece might have expected to find someone who spoke their native tongue. But they most certainly did not expect to hear their own language flowing from the lips of anyone from the Galilee while attending a festival in Jerusalem.

That was the gob-smacking wonder that made people gather round. They weren't hearing wild babbling; they were hearing a coherent proclamation of God's deeds of power, spoken in their own native language by people who had no reason or opportunity to learn even one of them.

There will come a time when we can talk about the Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues, which springs from this event, and which Paul references in his letters. But I think the most important point of this passage is shared with the point of Christmas and the covenant at Mt. Sinai way back in Exodus. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus wants a loving relationship with us and is willing to translate that invitation into as many languages as it takes for every one of us to easily hear, understand, and respond.

One of the most common questions people have asked me over the years is how to listen for God's voice. Anne, you tell me that God is speaking to me anywhere and everywhere, but I can't seem to hear it. What am I missing? How do I hear God's voice?

There are many reasons that we have trouble tuning in to what God is saying to us, but one fundamental issue is that we frequently forget the lesson of Pentecost—that God speaks to each of us in our own native language. While the example in Acts is God speaking through the disciples in the spoken languages of a wide variety of nations, the point is not just that God can speak English, Mandarin, Finnish, and Tamil. It's not even learning whether God prefers to communicate in person, or by phone, text, or email.

The point is that God speaks in a way that each of us understands on a non-verbal level also—God speaks in the native language of our own lives, interests, and understandings as well as through people speaking the language of our lips. And, wonder of wonders, God has the audacity to talk to us in all of those ways outside of church.

When we're talking with someone and the person brings up a passion we share, we often say, "Now you're speaking my language!" One of the most popular relationship books over the past 20 years is Gary Chapman's book on the five love languages, which focuses on the different, mostly non-verbal, ways the people communicate love in intimate relationships.

The book has grown into a full-blown franchise today because so many people recognize that, even if we're making a sincere effort to verbally communicate with a loved one, we can still get tripped up. If you speak the love language of gift giving and receiving and your significant other speaks the love language of spending quality time together; you will not understand each other. Those actions are, in their way, different languages—native to some, foreign to others.

A language, in the word's broadest sense, is a code capable of carrying a message. And whatever that message is can only be heard by those who speak the particular language—who have learned the code. We're used to thinking of language as spoken, or even symbolic like sign language, morse code, or even the waving flags of semaphore. But music is also a language with many dialects. So are the graphic arts. So are the many faces of the natural world, from every one of its creatures to our weather patterns to the stories told by the physics of distant stars. Math is a language. Architecture is a language.

In Acts 2, the rushing wind and tongues of flame were a language—the language of Sinai and Torah and Covenant—that reminded all those gathered for the festival of the liberation and formation of their people; of the way God fed them in the wilderness and led them home. A history that would have taken hours if not days to recount in a spoken language is given to us in two sentences describing wind and flame. But if you don't speak wind and flame, you're left scratching your head saying, "What now?"

So, an important step in recognizing and hearing God's voice is to understand the many faces of language. Key to that is to ask yourself about your own native languages—especially the non-verbal ones. What

medium gets through to you best? God will speak to you in those languages, too, giving you many more places to look and listen.

If you think God is only speaking through sermons in churches, you're going to miss 90% of God's communication with you. Out gardening? Yup. Teaching school? Yup. Puzzling over the blueprints on a construction project? Yup. If you love it, God is there, inviting you into deeper relationship or sending something you need in that very language.

As some of you know, I am a gamer. Back in 2005 I fired up the latest game in the Civilization franchise and watched its opening cinematic. While those are always very well done, in this new version of the game, it was the music rather than the video that caught my attention. It had lyrics, but I didn't understand them. I didn't even know if they were a real language or some fantasy language made up for the game.

But what I did know was that the music reached in and drenched my soul with something joyful and amazing. Every time I went to play the game, I let it play all the way through, even though I usually would have clicked away the opening cinematic to get to the game itself. I heard the music and I got out of my chair and danced; I cried; it lifted my spirits. Every. Single. Time.

Then one day I got worried. The music had lyrics that I didn't understand, and this was a video game after all. While the music in the game was moving me, Lord only knew what this song was actually saying. I've always had very mixed feelings about songs like Mack the Knife, where everyone is happily laughing and dancing to lyrics about people having their throats slit. So, I hunted through the game's credits for the name of the song and then looked it up online to see what I could find out.

The name of the piece was "Baba Yetu" and the lyrics were—wait for it—the Lord's Prayer in Swahili. "Baba Yetu," composed by Christopher Tin, went on to win the first Grammy ever awarded for music in a video game. Listening to and connecting to that music was, quite literally, prayer; and it connected me to God's presence even though I didn't know the language of the lyrics or have a translation in front of me.

I didn't understand a single word of the spoken language; but the medium of music is a native language for me, so my soul heard God speak in a way that I could hear it. Not only that, God knew where to find me to deliver that joy. "Let's see—what game is she playing now?"

Pentecost teaches us that God's spirit knows no barriers. God will connect to us in whatever language will get through. But, to hear it, we have to be open to the fact that, even though we're in Jerusalem, God might be speaking Vietnamese. Even though we're in our woodshop cutting boards, God might be revealing something about life in the grain of the wood. Even though we're stuck in traffic, God might have a playlist waiting just for us.

Sometimes God is speaking and we're within earshot, but it's not in our language. Whenever God speaks through mathematical formulas, I'm more likely to run from the room than feel the love. That's for somebody else. But sometimes we hear a message loud and clear, and it is **not** God speaking. How do we know it's not God? Because it doesn't pass the most fundamental test. 1 John 4:8 puts it best. "God is love."

If the message is about who to hate, or how to destroy, it's not God speaking, even if you're hearing it in church from your pastor. Even if it's literally a Bible verse. The whole point of looking to Jesus as the word made flesh is because the word made words in the text of the Bible is so confusing and easily misunderstood. Love is the test.

It's true that sometimes love has to deliver a hard message. "Tough love" is a thing. More than once I've had to make a pastoral call with the police in tow. To say God always speaks with love is not to say that God's message is always the one we want to hear. But it is to say that, when God speaks, even the most difficult message comes wrapped in respect, care, and a path to better times and different outcomes in the future.

This Pentecost, the message is “listen.” God is speaking exactly what you need to hear in a language that is more familiar than your breathing. But you might be missing it because it’s spoken by a simple Galilean, rather than a decorated scholar or formal religious authority. Maybe you didn’t recognize it because you never considered that God would be bothered to seek you out through the music in a video game; to become that accessible; to take on human flesh and live among us, not just in church, but in every possible place and circumstance on earth. God is speaking to you in your own native language. What is that for you? Try listening there. Amen.