

"God's Gift"      1 Corinthians 12: 3-13; Ps. 104:23-34,35b; Acts 2  
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David E. Young  
Pentecost Sunday, May 11, 2008

Imagine it's early morning in Jerusalem. It's a day much like any other. People are starting to go about their business. The day is just beginning to unfold.

Suddenly there is a sound of a mighty wind. It's coming from somewhere over there - south side of town. And then you hear a mixture of voices - you don't recognize any of the languages ... except there's one that is your native tongue.

You haven't heard that in ages, certainly not since you moved to Jerusalem. But now, loud as can be, you hear someone calling out the amazing things God has done! In your own native language, no less!!...In reality, they might as well have been calling your name... for you hear the sound of it and you run to find out if the person speaking is from your home town, and maybe even went to your high school, and perhaps knows some of the same people you know.

Obviously you aren't alone. Others have had the same experience. Quite a crowd has gathered. It looks like thousands! A pretty big mob! If you didn't know better you'd think it was a free gas giveaway or a Nascar event, or Music Sunday at Chapel Lane ... But, wait, it's only 8 o'clock in the morning and you're in the narrow streets of Jerusalem.

The people around you are comparing notes. They are all hearing about God's marvelous deeds in the language that is closest to their hearts - - the language of home.

As a transplant living in a foreign city and constantly having to work overtime to translate what others are saying, what could be more magnetic, more reassuring, than hearing your own language wafting through the streets?

And, in hearing it, what would you expect to see once you turned the corner and stood face to face with --- with whom? --- who else but a fellow countryman?

But, if the sound you heard traveling on the morning breeze was what drew you close, now the sight in front of you stops you in your tracks. For the person speaking your language obviously isn't from anywhere near your native land. He doesn't look anything like those from your country. In fact, he looks for all the world like a Jewish peasant! And so do the others with him.

Is this some kind of trick? It makes no sense. The people around you are just as confused as you are. Some of them are speculating and wondering out loud. Some are simply amazed. Others are tilting their heads and hitting their ears as if they're trying to dislodge some water so they can hear more clearly. Still others are ready to turn and walk away, sniffing the air for the telltale smells of a party and drawing the cynical conclusion that they must be drunk.

But, if they are drunk, how is it that their speech so clear? So understandable? Maybe the scoffers are the ones who had too much to drink last night...

So, what would your reaction be? This certainly isn't what you expected to hear early on a Sunday morning in Jerusalem. Would you attribute it to a drunken fit, or would you want some other explanation, such as the one Peter gave?

Would the evidence in front of your eyes and in your ears be enough to convince you that something new was happening? Would it be evidence for the work of God's Spirit? Would you see it as nothing short of miraculous? And would it be enough for you to join with the others in asking Peter: "What must we do now?"

This is a critical question. For, there were those there who were unconvinced. The sound of the wind, the sound of the native language, the sound of Peter preaching ... it all fell on deaf ears. Not everyone responded by welcoming this unexpected gift of God.

Even today, there are many who come into contact with the life-changing message of God's forgiving love in Christ, and remain unmoved and untouched. It's as though someone is speaking to them in a foreign language.

But for those who accept Peter's invitation, a whole new world opens up to them. Immediately they are part of a new community where the differences of language and culture and history and tradition are no longer walls that divide, but open doors through which the Spirit of God is free to move.

Strangers in a foreign land are now brothers and sisters in Christ. Those who were considered the dregs of humanity are now part of the family. Those who a few weeks ago were calling for the execution of the Lord of Life, are now receiving the healing gift of forgiveness and love and new life in his name. Yes, God is shaking the foundations of society and calling forth a new way of looking at the world around us and the people in our midst, and ourselves as well.

The world around us is now filled with the free-blowing wind of the Spirit. God is everywhere and in everyone. We may have been the ones who tried to slam the lid on God's presence in our lives by crucifying Jesus - - whether it was 2,000 yrs. ago or a year ago, or just last week, it doesn't matter. Whenever we turn our backs on God and the love and grace and mercy God has to offer us, it's as if God is dead to us.

But now, with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, ... now we see ourselves in a different light. We see ourselves as the ones for whom Christ died. And the wonder of it all is that whenever God opens our ears and our eyes: that is a moment of baptism. That is a time when we can start afresh, by letting go of the past and embracing the new life that God offers to us in Christ.

We weren't expecting it. We didn't think anything was going to change. But then the wind blew across our faces and we heard the sound of God's love in a voice that seemed familiar to us and we got up and we came close and found we'd arrived at home.

It was, and is, God's gift to us. What else is there to say but "Thanks be to God!"

Let us pray: