

**Luke 24:36-52**  
**Day of Pentecost**

**Acts 2:1-13**

**June 4, 2017**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **CAN THEY HEAR US NOW?**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

“Can you hear me now?”

The Verizon man has jumped ship and now promotes Sprint. However, in June 2002, Verizon unveiled the “Can you hear me now?” ad campaign with Testman, a Verizon field tester in his gray jacket and black horn-rimmed glasses. When Testman dropped in on various and random locations, he would ask someone on the other end of the line, “Can you hear me now?” After a pause, Testman would say, “Good!” And the message was clear — Verizon’s cell coverage was the best!

Instead of getting involved in a price war with other carriers, Verizon set out to increase its subscriber base and establish itself as a premium service provider. When the ad campaign started, Verizon had 32.5 million subscribers. Within a year, the number had grown to 37.5 million. At the beginning of 2004, the number had jumped to 43.8 million. Sales grew by 10% during the first year of the ad campaign. “Can you hear me now?” became a very popular tagline, even if it got a bit irritating. The Tonight Show had a skit with Alexander Graham Bell, sitting at his first phone, asking, “Can you hear me now?”<sup>1</sup>

In January 2002, Verizon had something to say, and they said it clearly and effectively — and people heard them, loud and clear. On this Pentecost Sunday 2017, I ask this question to the church: As the church, do we have something to say, and do we say it clearly and effectively? Can they hear us now?

Much has been written about the miracles of that day of Pentecost — the wind, the flames, the preaching. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all was how each one listening — Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs — heard the message about God’s deeds of power in their own language. “What does this mean?” indeed!

The Day of Pentecost is often called “the birthday of the church.” When the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability, it was the fulfillment of what Jesus had promised them just before he ascended into heaven: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) Later on in Luke’s story of Pentecost, we read, “So those that welcomed [Peter’s] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of

bread and the prayers. . . All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:41-47)

Every once in a while, I hear or read someone say, “I wish the church today could be more like the New Testament church.” Well, you can’t get a much more original picture of the early church than what Luke reports in this second chapter of Acts. In her comments about this Pentecost story and the church, Margaret Aymer writes, “The Holy Spirit proves not to be a quiet, heavenly dove, but rather a violent force that blows the church into being. That church consists mainly of immigrants, people of different languages and cultures with different mother tongues. . . In the midst of the chaos of Pentecost rests an anchor. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”<sup>2</sup> Extending what she says about the power of the Holy Spirit in that very earliest church, Rev. Tom Long also talks about the gift of Pentecost. He calls it “the gift of something to say. The church stood up and spoke. The church was moved from silence to language. The church talked and the whole world heard the good news in its own language.”<sup>3</sup>

In June 2012, the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) made a commitment and set a goal of establishing 1001 New Worshiping Communities in the United States by 2022. Notice the commitment was not to build 1001 new church buildings, but to establish 1001 new worshiping communities. The guiding principles of the 1001 Movement include:

- \* seeking to make and form new disciples of Jesus Christ, to change and transform the world
- \* to shift from an inward-focused, membership-maintenance model of church to a more outward, creative, and disciple-making model
- \* to consider “How can we be the church in a new way?”
- \* to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, to help disciples with a vibrant faith go out to share with their friends, neighbors, and communities
- \* to create communities of faith outside our standard models of church planting<sup>4</sup>

As Tom Long said, on Pentecost the church moved out to where the people were — all sorts of people, who spoke many different languages. The church stood up and spoke. The church talked and the whole world (at least in Luke’s list of nations) heard the good news in its own language. That’s the vision of 1001 New Worshiping Communities.

It’s striking to me what *didn’t* happen on that day of Pentecost. The disciples *didn’t* stay inside and share among themselves the wonderful thing that had just happened to them. The disciples *didn’t* say, “If you want to hear what we have to say, come where we are.” The disciples *didn’t* speak in a language no one else could understand (maybe today we might call it “churchy” language that sounds foreign to folks who aren’t accustomed to church?).

During the summer of 1987, I spent eight hours a day in the seminary library trying to learn enough French and German to pass the GRE language exams and meet the doctoral committee's requirement. I remember the chairman of the graduate studies committee looking at my grade report, peering over his glasses, and saying, "I see you scored the minimum score." I said, "Yes, sir, and I met the requirement!"

According to its online support site, it will take you 120-150 hours to complete Levels 1-3 using the Rosetta Stone Language Learning system, and 200+ hours to complete Levels 1-5. The United States Foreign Service Institute predicts it will take you 480 hours to reach basic fluency in languages such as French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and a few others. If you want to be basically fluent in more difficult languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, you will need to work for 720 hours.<sup>5</sup> At Pentecost, the disciples began to speak in other languages right on the spot, when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. I wish I had been filled with the Holy Spirit like that in the library reading room during the summer of 1987!

That must have been an amazing sound experience! Apparently it got the crowd's attention, since they were bewildered, amazed, and astonished, and asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language?" (Acts 2:6-7) Actually, the answer to that question is the same as the answer to the question, "How is it that the disciples were able to speak in other languages?" The Holy Spirit gave them ability.

The miracle of Pentecost that day was a miracle of speaking the Good News and a miracle of hearing about God's deeds of power. As strange and fascinating as the story is from a literal point of view, think about its meaning when we consider the "many other languages" as describing people in all of their many differences and varieties. In an interesting commentary article called "The Politics of Language," Amy Allen applies Luke's story of *that* day of Pentecost to our life in the church *today*. She writes, "And so, even if many other people *can* speak English or whatever the common language of your church may be, the call of the Gospel is not to settle for that. The call of the Gospel is to speak God's word of love in as many languages, in as many ways, with as much passion as there are stars in the sky. The miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit *comes*, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our *native* language — the language of our dreams, and the Holy Spirit bolsters us to dream new dreams and engage in bigger realities because of this presence."<sup>6</sup>

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across a wonderfully challenging statement — "The church isn't the church is it stays indoors." I think that's another way of saying that the call and promise of Pentecost is for the church to speak the Gospel in a language that people can understand so that people can hear the Good News in a language they understand. I'm not necessarily — or even primarily — talking about English or Spanish or French or German or Arabic or Chinese or Korean. What I mean is, since we have something important to say about Jesus Christ, we need to trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the ability to "speak the right kind of language" so they can hear us now.

The question, of course, is whether or not we want God's Holy Spirit blowing into our lives with that kind of power and presence and promise. Have you ever seen the movie *Chocolat*? As the movie begins, the narrator's voice says, "*Once upon a time, there was a quiet little village in the French countryside, whose people believed in Tranquilité — Tranquility. If you lived in this village, you understood what was expected of you. You knew your place in the scheme of things. And if you happened to forget, someone would help remind you. In this village, if you saw something you weren't supposed to see, you learned to look the other way. If perchance your hopes had been disappointed, you learned never to ask for more. So through good times and bad, famine and feast, the villagers held fast to their traditions. Until, one winter day, a sly wind blew in from the North.*"

The narrator speaks those words over scenes of the French villagers gathering for worship at the local church. In the tranquil setting of that little church, when the sly North wind blows the church doors open, everyone is startled. The mayor, Comte de Reynaud, who tends to all of the details of the church, is obviously irritated when the doors blow open. He stalks down the center aisle and, as he slams the doors shut against the wind, the narrator emphatically repeats, "Tranquility!"

Luke's picture of Pentecost is hardly one of tranquility. Instead, it's one of chaos, with the sound like the rush of a violent wind (someone in Bible study, "If trains had been invented then, Luke probably would have said, 'It sounded just like a freight train!') and divided tongues as of fire and the babble of other languages. But, in the midst of that Holy Spirit chaos, the church spoke and the people heard.

Can they hear us now? To answer that question, maybe we need to start by asking ourselves if we trust in and rely on God's Holy Spirit to help us say what needs to be said about Jesus Christ in ways people can hear the Good News. Or do people look at us in the church and say, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Your actions speak so loudly, I can not hear what you are saying"?

Rev. Tom Long, renowned preacher and teacher of preachers, tells a story about being the minister in a church. Let him tell you:

"Many years ago, when I was the brand new pastor of a small church, I announced to my congregation one Sunday, 'Next Sunday morning at ten o'clock, I'm going to start a pastor's church school class on the basics of the Christian faith. If you are new to the faith, or if you would like a refresher course in the faith, I invite you to join me next Sunday at ten.'

"The next week, I went to my classroom expecting to greet a throng, and I was immediately disappointed. There were only three elementary school children, three little girls, waiting on me for the class. I tried to hide my disappointment and over the new few weeks to do the best I could to teach them about the Christian faith. The week before Pentecost Sunday, I said to them, 'Do you girls know what Pentecost is?'

"They didn't. So, I said, 'Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world.'

“Two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but one of them got her eyes as big as saucers. And when she could finally speak, she said, ‘Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!’”

Tom Long said, “The beautiful thing about that is not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened in our church, that God’s Spirit could have come even to our little congregation and given us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear.”<sup>7</sup>

On this Day of Pentecost, I’ll ask again: “Can they hear us now?”

***Let us pray: Eternal God, as you sent the promised gift of your Holy Spirit upon the disciples, look upon us, your church, and open our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit. Kindle in us the fire of your love. Strengthen our lives for service in your kingdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit; one God, now and forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Can you hear me now?” Campaign (May 9, 2008) at [www.marketing-case-studies.blogspot.com](http://www.marketing-case-studies.blogspot.com).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Aymer, “Commentary on Acts 2:1-21,” June 4, 2017 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, “What’s the Gift?” Acts 2:1-12, Pentecost, May 27, 2012 at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

<sup>4</sup> Go to [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org) and find “1001 New Worshiping Communities” for much more information.

<sup>5</sup> Information taken from: “How long will it take me to learn a new language using Rosetta Stone Language Learning?” at [www.support.rosettastone.com](http://www.support.rosettastone.com) and “How Long Should it Take to Learn a Language?” at [www.blog.thelinguist.com](http://www.blog.thelinguist.com).

<sup>6</sup> Amy Allen, “The Politics of Language — Acts 2:1-21,” May 9, 2016 at [www.politicaltheology.com](http://www.politicaltheology.com).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas G. Long, “What’s the Gift?”