

“What Does This Mean?”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Pentecost Sunday

May 19, 2024

I want to ask you a superpower fantasy question. If you could have one superpowered ability, what would it be? Would you wish to fly, to catch a bird’s eye view of the earth, and feel the wind uphold your body? Some would choose teleportation, as a more efficient way. Just think: one of our church members, Diane Lee, is in South Korea right now. What if she could eat dinner with her family and friends there, and then join us for this church service, with just a blink of an eye? Some might choose to read other people’s thoughts— I already worry enough about what other people think of me, so that superpower seems overrated. Maybe at coffee hour, while you’re also enjoying some Pentecost birthday cake, you can talk with someone new and ask them what their superpower of choice will be.

I think teleportation would be pretty sweet. But I’ve always thought I would like to be able to understand and speak *all* languages. The gift of tongues, if you will.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, God’s people told a story of the time when everyone spoke just one language. They knew about God. And they wanted to know more about what God is like, to know where to find God, and perhaps they even wanted to grasp God’s power, to know what it all means. And so, they decided, “Come, let’s build a tower, up to the heavens. We can really make a name for ourselves.” Maybe they thought that physically reaching God’s dwelling would give them some sort of superpowers of their own. And so, brick by brick, stone by stone, they built the tower. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (it seems that God’s pronouns were plural in those days). So that, as the story in Genesis tells it, is the way that humans came up with many different languages.

The type of story I just shared with you is an etiology- a story or myth that explains why things are the way they are. As my seminary bible teacher taught me, long, long ago, people would sit around their evening fires and share stories, and through the stories, weave meaning into their experiences. In time, an awareness of God entered into their stories, and so they also sought to use their stories as a way of tying the holy into their earthly experiences.

When I read scripture, there are times when the words awaken my heart and make my senses tremble, and I can feel something holy rumbling through those words. Most times, however, I find that I do not pause enough to let the power of the words echo through me. And then, there are some parts of the bible where I do not see- at least, not yet- how this might be inspired text. Pages and pages of laws or genealogy or war stories aren't likely going to make my heart flutter with love for Jesus. But I do hold out the possibility that one day will come, and I will find an overlooked nugget of meaning wedged in even the lines of scripture I had most ignored or even scorned.

Pentecost actually was a Jewish holiday before it was a Christian one. In Hebrew, it is called Shavuot, and it comes 50 days after Passover- that's how we get the Greek prefix Penta. For Jews, the holiday marks the receiving of the Torah- the tablets of words that represent the covenant God made with the Hebrew people at Mount Sinai. In the form we have it today, it is the first 5 books of our bible.

Of course, Pentecost took on a whole new meaning with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

We can look at scripture as the word of God- as Presbyterians, we generally understand this to be humans' best effort at recording how they saw God interact with the world and in relationship with God's people. The Word took on a new understanding with Jesus; John's gospel refers to the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, in how he describes Jesus. It was not enough for God's relationship with us to be on a tablet, a scroll, a page. So, God's word came to us in body and blood, in the person of Jesus Christ.

But after Jesus' ascension, what access would we have to the Word? The early followers of Jesus certainly had a period of "what next?" as they thought about their purpose following Jesus's physical departure.

Jesus had promised not to leave them without a presence. He described the Holy Spirit in many ways: the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, a holy dwelling that will abide within you. Like many things that cannot be adequately described without experiencing them, even Jesus' words did not prepare his followers for the fire and wind arrival of the Spirit on that Pentecost day, and the tongues.

Can I talk about the tongues of fire for a minute? Wonder with me about what that possibly can mean. Yesterday I was in Jersey City for a rehearsal for my choir concert that will be tonight. After rehearsal, I wandered in the neighborhood to find something to eat. I ended up on a block named "India Square." An aromatic swirl of coconut, ginger, mustard, cardamom, and spices my nose could not name wafted out of various restaurants and groceries. I chose a restaurant that had a lunch buffet, so I could sample many things. And I knew, noting that I had suddenly become the only one around who didn't have some kind of Desi background, that they would not be offering what my Leonia Indian neighbors call "baby spice" in the dishes they serve their young children and their White friends. I gamely tried a number of things, and with each bite, my tongue felt hotter and hotter, until it was on fire. I tried to balance the heat with bites of naan bread and sour dosa crepe, to no relief. Wiping the sweat off my brow, I desperately asked the waiter for a mango lassi, which I slurped down until I could feel my tongue again.

But I do not think that's the kind of tongues of fire that landed upon the faithful on Pentecost. Some may think that this was an example of speaking in tongues, that some people believe is the language of angels which humans cannot understand, unless you have the gift of interpreting Angel. But that's not what is happening here, either, because those gathered— people who had come from a wide variety of countries and cities throughout the Jewish diaspora— each recognized what was being said in their own, original languages.

We don't know exactly *what* they said. Luke spends a good amount of time— five verses— making the point that Galileans— not known to be a cosmopolitan crowd— were speaking every language of the immigrant groups surrounding them, and it

lists all the different places they came from. Similar to this part of NJ, in Jerusalem people had arrived from all over the known world, whether for work or for religious pilgrimage or some personal reason, the text does not make clear. We can only guess what they might have been saying, but the bigger point is that something is happening that is moving the people's understanding from being a particular group of people— this tiny group of persecuted followers of Jesus— to something bigger, something that would include every country and change the whole world.

In a sense, it is kind of a reversal of the Tower of Babel story. Toni Morrison reflected upon the Tower of Babel story in her Nobel Lecture in 1993. She said, "The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached." But Morrison wondered, "Whose heaven?... and what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet."¹

But on Pentecost, language becomes a pathway *to* God, rather than an obstacle to finding God.

For this year, I think that is the Pentecost message we most need. We need to ask the Spirit to bless our tongues, and our ears, so that we can find understanding between differences. It does not mean that we need an assimilated culture where people talk the same. It means that we need to sharpen our senses and our sensitivities, so that we can receive what the Spirit might be saying when it comes from a tongue that is unfamiliar to our own. One of the things I love most about this church is that it is a place where that happens naturally, but it's also a community that pushes us beyond our pews to listen, speak, and receive those whom the Spirit places in our way.

One thing our Reformed tradition teaches is the value we place on each person as a recipient of the Holy Spirit. There is a great deal of trust that we have in

¹ This quote is taken from Cole Arthur Riley's book, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human*, p. 265.

each believer's ability to be moved by the Spirit, and for that reason we are not dogmatic in what we teach, and we are not hierarchical in how we lead. We value each believer's experience of the holy, and voice to share how the Spirit moves them and together moves the church. We will hear now the words of one of our lay leaders, Elder Tom Topousis, as he shares his understanding of his work on Session to be an expression of the Spirit's movement in him.