

Say What?

Acts 2:1-21 (NIV)

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ " 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Language is a funny thing. We can speak the same language without speaking the same language. For those of you who served in the Air Force or who work as civilian airmen now, this might be a perfectly intelligible sentence: "Before I climbed in my bunk at my quarters I took my POV for some POL and RTB." Translation: Before I went to bed, I took my car out to fill it with gas, and then I returned to base. Or, "During the inspection, the CO said it was unsat and gave me KP for a week. Now I have to get up at O Dark Thirty to clean the latrine before I head to the mess hall and do KP." Translation: During an inspection, the commander said it was unsatisfactory and he gave me kitchen help duties for a week. Now I have to get up really early to clean the bathroom before going to the cafeteria to do my kitchen duties."

And it's not just military talk, of course. A few pastors might understand me when I say, "I had to go to Wisconsin two weeks ago because I'm part of the CMC for the WELS which meets at the CMM." Translation: I had to go to Wisconsin because I am part of the Campus Ministry Committee for our national church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which meets at the Center of Mission and Ministry in the Milwaukee area. Or I could say something like, "The most beautiful message of the Bible is Christ's incarnation which allowed for his crucifixion for my redemption and reconciliation to God." Translation: The most beautiful message of the Bible is how the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one chosen to save us from our sins, took on human flesh while still being God in order to live perfectly for me and die for me so that he would purchase me from sin, death, and the devil so that I can live forever with God in the peace of the accomplished fact that he has taken my sins away. Even simplifying the message, you can still get lost.

If we leave these phrases untranslated or offer no aid in understanding them, then we are just speaking jargon – technical terms only understood by specific people or group. If I proclaim to you nothing but jargon, I risk telling you about the wonders and greatness of God without you understanding any of it. This is what God works to overcome on the day of Pentecost.

For the Jews, the Day of Pentecost comes 50 days after the Sunday after the Passover. This specific Pentecost celebration in our reading today comes 50 days after the very first Easter Sunday. Every year Jews and converts to Judaism would gather in Jerusalem at this time to dedicate the entire grain harvest to God. Jesus' disciples were there too, waiting for the gift that Jesus had promised to send them, when "suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (verses 2-4) With an event like this, a crowd began to form. But it didn't form because of the sound of wind or even the fire that had come to rest on Jesus' disciples. What drew this crowd in was the fact that "each one heard their own language being spoken." (verse 6) This was amazing to them, perplexing, even troubling. How could these blue-collar workers from Galilee who probably had no language training nor any formal biblical training be doing what they were doing? "We hear them declaring the wonders (or more literally, 'the greatness') of God in our own tongues!" (verse 11)

What could the disciples be saying that would confuse or perplex the people? What might we say that would do the same? How about that there is nothing that I can do to make God love me, to have him accept me, to make myself worthy before him? This goes against our natural inclinations which say that we can make ourselves look better before God, that I'm inherently good, that I can do more good than bad to earn God's love, that I can progress on a system of merits, work my way up a ladder to heaven, so to speak. But God says it doesn't work this way at all. Instead, he tells me that I am worthy before him right now because he has given me holiness, righteousness, worthiness. It's his gift to me, a gift given simply by hearing what he has done for me, a gift given through his Word and the waters of baptism, just as Symphony received this morning.

What could the disciples have been saying or what could we say that would amaze the people? Well, just 50 days ago this Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead and spent the next 40 days appearing to his disciples, giving many convincing proofs that he was alive. That's not natural. Dead people don't just come back to life. Or how amazing it would be to declare that because this Jesus who died on a Friday 52 days ago was both God - the one and only God - as well as truly and completely human, every sin, every wrong thing that you and I have ever done, has been completely paid for and cleared from our records. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, God sees us as he sees Jesus - without sin, pure, perfect. It doesn't matter what you have done in the past nor how big you think your sins or another person's sins are. Jesus' life and death and resurrection completely pays for it. There is no favoritism shown by God when it comes to forgiveness. He paid for all people's sins totally and completely, without holding anything back.

What could the disciples or we say that would trouble people? How about talking about a great day of Judgment when Jesus returns, a day when the world ends, a day where there is blood and fire and billows of smoke, when the sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood? (verses 19-20) Want to make people feel uncomfortable? Talk about a day of reckoning, a day when everything you have ever done will be uncovered, laid bare, no secrets, no cover-ups, completely exposed, and God will judge you. The bar is perfection, and he will accept nothing less. Or even more troubling is that you stand in judgment of his Word right here, right now, today. Any command that you know that you have broken, or even if you don't know, incriminates you. There's no way around it. You can't deflect God's judgment with humor or sarcastic comments as some of them did when they claimed the disciples had had too much wine.

When we talk about these big things of life, of who God is and what he does for us, this will cause people to be perplexed, amazed, and/or troubled. This will happen because the Holy Spirit is still working today as he was back on the Day of Pentecost. We may not have the sound of rushing wind or tongues of fire resting on us to speak in languages we never studied before, but he is working through what we say. That's why Peter referenced God's Word from the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (verses 17-18) To prophesy means to share God with people, to explain him, to declare his wonders and his greatness. Whenever you talk about God and proclaim his wonders and his greatness, the Holy Spirit is going to be working. This means that it's not up to you to convince people to believe in God, to persuade them to call on the name of the Lord to be saved from their sin. This is what the Holy Spirit will do while you tell people about him and what he has done. This is why we want to be clear when it comes to talking about our God.

I freely admit that the church is very guilty of using jargon. And you know what, sometimes that's a good thing because there are things that our God does that are specific to him and these words don't come up anywhere else. However, think about the person you are declaring the wonders and greatness of God to. Do they know what you are saying? Do they get it? Am I talking about my God in a way that they can know his greatness the way I know his greatness? Can I clarify this so that they know what I'm saying? These are questions that I'm constantly asking myself as I declare the wonders and greatness of God.

Peter clarified to the people what they were hearing that day. He would go on to lead them to recognize their short-comings, their sin, their imperfection, their unworthiness before God, to see that they were responsible of putting innocent Jesus to death on the cross. And when the people were cut to the heart, panged with guilt, and asked, "What shall we do?" Peter responded by having them call on the name of the Lord. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39) When that crowd first gathered, they didn't know what was going on. But by the work of the Holy Spirit as the disciples declared the wonders and greatness of God, about his unconditional forgiveness, about his sacrifice made to save us from our imperfections, 3000 people were added to their number that day. 3000 people called on the name of the Lord and were saved. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

You and I, we get to declare this same message, this same forgiveness, this same gift of worthiness freely given from our God. And we have the same Holy Spirit working through our words as we do so. So, declare the wonders and greatness of God as clearly as we can so that many more may call on the name of the Lord and be saved. Amen.