

Sermon – “Cast Out, Left Out, Sent Out”

Sunday, May 24, 2015

Scripture Readings – Acts 1:1-9, Acts 2:1-8, 11b-18

Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes to us from the beginning of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, reminding us of the lead-up to the Pentecost scene we will hear about in a moment. Listen now to these words from Acts, Chapter 1, verses 1 through 9.

1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

The second reading, also from the book of Acts, tells us of the remaining followers of Jesus, only around 120 at this point, all gathered together in Jerusalem at the time of the festival of Pentecost. Jesus having ascended into heaven and no longer with them, they were unsure what they were awaiting. Listen now for the story of God’s Word coming through these, the first members of the Church:

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

11b in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your

old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: “Cast Out, Left Out, Sent Out”

The text: “... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Acts 2:11b

Genesis, chapter 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”¹

Creation began thus, with the presence of the Spirit in the darkness and the proclamation of a Word from God.

Mark, chapter 1: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”²

The public life of Jesus Christ began thus, with the presence of the Spirit and the proclamation of a Word from God.

Only shortly after this event, Jesus, returning to Nazareth, announces his ministry in the reading of a prophecy from the book of Isaiah, declaring “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and making known his task: “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”³

Again, first in the vision given to Isaiah and then in its fulfillment in Jesus’s appearance, the Spirit of the Lord moves in the darkness, in the proclamation of a Word from God.

This darkness is of a different sort, not the darkness of the formless void of pre-Creation, but the darkness of human suffering and oppression. And it is surely relieving if the Spirit moves here, too, for in these shadows we all live.

Monday is the day on which this country remembers all those whose lives have been lost in war. And when we think upon those losses, knowing that every war that has ever been is an artifact of human sin, and that none of them, not one of them, ever had to happen, except by the wrongful and destructive choices of human beings; when we reflect on how many millions of human lives have been thus unnecessarily sacrificed; when we consider not only the sum of lives lost but the totality of human effort that has gone into destroying them rather than into constructive purposes, surely we must hope it is true when we find that Isaiah’s prophecy quoted by Jesus goes on further, to say that the

¹ Genesis 1:1-3 (Revised Standard Version).

² Mark 1:9-11 (New Revised Standard Version).

³ From Luke 4:16-19, quoting from Isaiah 61:1 (NRSV).

role of the anointed one is to “comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” It tells us that the mourners “shall build up the ancient ruins... shall raise up the former devastations... shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”⁴ We perhaps think all the way back to the beginning of the words of the same prophet, where he declares that the LORD “shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”⁵

Those words sound, frankly, like the description of another world altogether. They certainly aren’t believable descriptions of any state this world will ever arrive at by its own devices.

But these words are not merely predictions, they are promises.

The sound of a rushing, violent wind, and tongues like fire resting on the disciples, the crowd amazed and perplexed at the sudden preaching in all languages... what has happened in this strange story of Pentecost? What was it that arrived with those tongues like fire?

The presence of the Spirit, and the proclamation of a Word from God.

Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, has described it this way: “[T]he gift of Pentecost is the gift of something to say, a Word to speak in the brokenness and tragedy of the world that is unlike any other word.” “Did you notice,” he asks, “what happened to the church when the Spirit was given? It stood up and it spoke.” We are given, as Long puts it, “a Word to speak, that life is stronger than death, that hope is deeper than despair, that every tear will be dried, and that in the power of Christ’s resurrection, death and pain will be no more. That Word is our gift to speak.”⁶

That Word has a powerful claim, as the answer to the wrongness of a world which cries out to be made right once more, and it has a powerful claim *on us* as well. Something has brought each of us here. Somewhere along the way, we have heard it said in our own language. Perhaps we have known the Spirit’s movement in our own hearts, and found the Word compelling, and we come in joy and faith. Or maybe we do not know what to make of all this yet, like the hearers at this Pentecost scene who were at first perplexed, and like them we are uncertain but intrigued enough to remain, to hear more, to watch and see, along with that crowd who wondered, “What does this mean?”

We as the church, I hope, will all do our best to share what this means. We have heard something, have received something, and it is not for us alone; it is a fire that is to spread its light and warmth to the whole world. We each have a place in this.

Surely you have noticed that even among people who all ostensibly speak the same tongue, we do not all really speak quite the same language. You only need go to a gathering of people in a different profession, or turn on talk radio, or walk into a church of a different type than your own, to recognize

⁴ From Isaiah 61:2-4 (NRSV).

⁵ Isaiah 2:4 (NRSV).

⁶ Long, Thomas G. “What’s the Gift?” May 27, 2012.

the extent to which people, despite all using English words, often have almost nothing in common in what they mean by them.

Our own response to this should be twofold. First, we need to appreciate that the spread of the Gospel through the world is more chaotic than we might find comfortable, and it comes to people in their native languages; it doesn't use for all people the same words it uses for us. Some people's ways of talking make us uncomfortable because their words of faith are not traditional-sounding enough, or because they are too traditionalist; some make us squeamish because of phrases they use which may have negative associations for us; some expressions of faith may be altogether unintelligible to us. We need to be cautious about looking down on the Gospel as it is found in other people's native frames of reference, and about disparaging the work of the Spirit when it comes through words we would not use.

Note that I am not saying that every statement said anywhere by anyone is actually true, nor am I attempting to suggest that everybody is really saying the same thing. But I am saying that what a word or phrase means to someone else is often not the same as what it implies for you, or for me, and we need to respect that. We need to allow that communication with some people requires actively translating before responding, and we need to avoid ridiculing or stepping on the ways in which other people may have legitimately experienced God. Sometime I will devote an entire sermon to that topic. For now, we should merely acknowledge the possibility of God speaking to people in words that are uncomfortable on our own tongues, and note that openness to that is an important responsibility that flows from the Pentecost story.

The second half of our response when we become aware of the differences in language around us is to recognize that this puts upon each of us a responsibility to share the Word in the languages with which we've been given familiarity. We each inhabit particular spheres within this world, and our own languages are those of the people with whom we share those spheres. How do we tell of the things Peter and these first members of the church told of, in the words of our own people?

That is something we should take the time to consider carefully. Moreover, we must remember that what we believe is actually expressed by what we say, and by what we do, as well as by how closely those two things are aligned with one another. Especially in this age which is hyper-aware of hypocrisy, we need to tell of God's grace and Christ's salvation in a holistic way.

A common saying, popularly attributed to Francis of Assisi, is "Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary." Now Francis, who was actually quite a prolific user of words to preach the Gospel, almost certainly did not say that, but it is a nicely put reminder that faith, hope, and love are things lived, not merely talked about.

However, we also need to be a little bit cautious about employing that saying. Many of us, probably our whole denomination, more or less, and I include myself in this group, are already somewhat uncomfortable and unsure of ourselves at the thought of going around and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, out loud, in words, outside this building. And so when we say something like, "Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary," it often actually serves us less as an exhortation to preach the Gospel in deeds too, and more as something we say to make ourselves feel okay with the fact that we don't much get around to using preaching it with words.

So we really need to consider both sides of the equation. Do we live lives as if we really trust that our true treasures are those stored up in heaven? Do we live as though we really believe we are meant to share freely the grace we have been given, and trusting that whatever we give up for the sake of following Christ is not loss but gain? Can people see that in our lives? Our spouses, our business associates, our clients, our teachers, our students, the other drivers forced to share the road with us?

And do we freely speak of why we live that way? Do our children hear us speaking of God as if God is an everyday part of our lives, and not just a Sunday morning thing? Do our friends know that our devotion to discipleship is not some kind of perfect certainty to which they cannot relate, but is an ongoing story of struggle and exploration, and that the Gospel we proclaim is not a quickly dismissed collection of too-easy, overly simplistic answers for everything, but is a deep, compelling, and inviting mystery which we only partially comprehend?

Do those around us have any idea why we follow Jesus Christ? Let us pray that we ourselves might come to know this, and to receive the gift the earliest church received, the gift of proclamation, by word and by deed.

In the eleventh chapter of the book of Genesis, the Tower of Babel project comes to nothing, and the people are scattered across the face of the earth, their communications confused and their purposes thwarted by their inability to speak the same language. But we heard today about how the same God who thwarted their human vision sends a Word which follows them out, across the face of the earth, speaking God's vision into all the languages of all the people.

And so even those who were cast out—from Eden, from Babel; across the whole face of the earth—are not, in the end, left out, for to the whole world the Spirit is sent out. It is poured out on not just the priests, not just the preachers, but upon “all flesh,” the old men and the young, the sons, the daughters, even to those from the lowest classes in human society.

We have been given the power of the Holy Spirit to dream... what do you dream of? Can you hear, faintly, under the noise of the broken and false kingdom of this world, the whispers of another, truer one? Do you tell of it?

Our task as the church begins thus, with the presence of the Spirit in the darkness and the proclamation of a Word from God.