“God’s Breath Creates”

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Bethany Presbyterian Church

Psalm 104: 24-34; 35b

Acts 2:1-21

May 19, 2024 Pentecost Sunday

***Psalm 104:24-34; 35b***

***O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.***

***25Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.***

***26There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.***

***27These all look to you to give them their food in due season;***

***28when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.***

***29When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.***

***30When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.***

***31May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—***

***32who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.***

***33I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.***

***34May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.***

***35Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!***

***Acts 2:1-21***

***When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.***

***5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.******7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others sneered and said,*** ***“They are filled with new wine.”***

***14But 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. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16No, 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. 18Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. 21Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’***

How about that list of names, eh? In modern day terms, it’s actually a large mass of land. The cities listed cover present day Iran, modern Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Crete, Saudi Arabia. When we think of modern day middle east, we may think of any *one* of these countries, but I’ve never thought about *all of them together*. Listing the cities of the visitors to Jerusalem way back on that Pentecost\* Day makes me realize that they all had come from so far away, and from such different places. They would have had all kinds of different languages and dialects represented. Today that same land area has over 60 languages spoken with another 20 minor languages also spoken. I kid you not, this text with all of these names was what I read the very first time I was the liturgist in my church. I had just been baptized. I’m sure they were thinking, ha! Let’s get the new kid to do it! I remember sitting on a wall by ocean beach with a seminary student teaching me how to say the names. Fortunately she was an excellent teacher and ended by saying, just do your best, and say whatever you say with confidence and no one really knows anyway!

So thank you all for making the attempt – as chaotic as that was, that was kind of the point. In an effort to recreate some of the confusion and chaos of what we can only imagine happened.

Sermons on this text often remind listeners that the chaos to clarity in this text mirrors the accounts in the Book of Genesis that describe God creating the world out of the darkness of chaos. From Genesis 1 we read, *“When God began to create the heavens and the earth,****2****the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”*  The references to God’s breath and creation continue in the Psalm portion that Pam read for us this morning. In this praise to God, the psalmist writes, *“when you send forth your spirit they are created.”* It’s the wind from God, the spirit of God, and the Holy Spirit that came upon the crowd at Pentecost that gives everything life.

The apostles were not expecting the noise, the wind, and the tongues of fire, or the chaos. They remained in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed just before he ascended. We read Jesus’ words to them last week, *“****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.”*  So they remained. So all those people from all of those other places, maybe they were part of the ends of the earth come to Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot, one of three “pilgrim” festivals requiring all male Jews to come to the temple in Jerusalem.

I wonder what they were expecting? I wonder what the day was like? One of the speakers at last week’s conference said we don’t have a crisis of faith, in this country, we have a crisis of imagination. So imagine with me,

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. The disciples were all in one place. There isn’t a crowd yet. *“ 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”* It was just the disciples, and just in the house where they were. *“ 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”*

It was this that drew the crowds. The disciples were Galileans, they were in the house when all of this chaos erupted. It sounds like they then were able to speak in other languages, so they must have opened the door to the house where they were staying. From the crowds perspective then, you’ve come to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival, and this large wind and noise and chaos erupts and you run maybe to the house where it all seems to be coming from – you could guess which house because all kinds of strange rumors were going around, whenever those men from Galilee came to town. You’d be right to run to their house*.* Sure enough. There were the disciples, speaking to them – but with a huge difference.

*“ 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”*

There’s the difference, they could hear what those Galilean men were saying – even though there were so many places represented in this crowd. You can bet that there were opinions about what was happening. Our author gives us two types of people present in the crowd. Likely there were more than two, but we hear from two types.

Those that wanted to engage with what was happening and showed curiosity – *“What does this mean?”* – and,

those who did not want to engage – who dismiss themselves from any obligation to engage by finding a reason to dismiss the men from Galilee. *“They are filled with new wine.”* This was not only a dismissal of the Galileans and their message, but because it was drunkenness, just bad behavior, there was no obligation to respond on the part of this type of crowd member, the non-curious kind.

Now lets shift from the scene in the text to something more current. If you were on any of the college campuses recently who have been witnessing protests about the war in Gaza, you would be a maybe like the crowd in the text that day at Pentecost.

There they were all gathered in one place.

What are they doing? Why are they there? Who are they?

What language are they speaking – hate language? peace language? Divisive language?

Which type of bystander are you? Are you curious? Do you want to engage? Sometimes it’s an easy yes or and easy no.

None of us are one type of crowd member all of the time. Sometimes we feel safe enough to engage? Safe enough physically – is anyone here going to hurt me or anyone else? Safe enough emotionally – is this just a group of bullies? Do I have any band width to be of any added value? What is my level of risk? What might the cost be to me, if I engage?

Does this subject touch my heart? Do I have any experiences that bring me along side this crowd? Do you remember the story of Penny Nixon and I talking about ministry? She said she was most comfortable behind a bullhorn, and I said, oh, not me, and she said, that’s okay, someone has to make the coffee. I mentioned a while ago that I’m going to start making some coffee.

One place that has caught my heart recently comes from a crowd I was a part of last night. One of my new friends from the artists collective in Tanforan, AZ Studio, had the opening of his one person show. The topic and purpose of his show is a difficult one so I won’t explain it here. In this crowd though last night, I felt a foreigner. The primary subject matter itself was not in any language that I currently speak. I could have dismissed the subject matter – they are just filled with new wine. Nothing to see here. But what I in the crowd *did* hear in my own language was the emotional language that the crowd was using. Lost, left out, bypassed, forgotten, overlooked, assistance, advocacy, love, heartache. Hearing something foreign, in a language that I could speak, gave me courage to lean in – to ask, to dip my toe in, lean forward. Maybe I’ll make them some coffee. “What does this mean?”

It’s when they are all gathered there in one place that the Holy Spirit does it’s work. You could be standing in that crowd right now.

Let us pray….

*\*“Shavuot,*the Jewish Pentecost, is a holiday that today commemorates the single most important event in Israel’s history: the giving of the *Torah*(the first five books in the Hebrew Bible) to Moses at Mount Sinai. Although it is not as well-known among non-Jews as Passover or *Sukkot,* the Feast of Booths, it is one of the three major festivals often called “pilgrim” festivals because in Bible times, all Jewish males were required to observe them at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.” Pentecost is just the Greek name for Shavuot, which is why that word is used in the New Testament. <https://www.ifcj.org/learn/jewish-holidays/what-is-shavuot-the-jewish-pentecost>