



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Surprising Acts of God VII: Learning to Speak

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Grace and Peace to you, my friends.

Today we conclude our sermon series, *The Surprising Acts of God* reflecting on the way God moved through the early disciples, compelling them to do and be more than they ever imagined, and hopefully inspiring us to consider God's presence in our lives.

Today's story appears at the beginning of The Acts of the Apostles, narrating what is often called the birth of the church, Pentecost. Fifty days following Jesus' resurrection, as he ascended into heaven, he said to his disciples "you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

To accomplish this impossible task, God breathed the Holy Spirit on those followers, gifting them an ability to speak in distant languages. We celebrate this day by wearing red to remind us of the fire of the spirit and their bravery.

Before I read this miraculous event, please pray with me.

Dear God, our lives are filled with words, and texts, and more words to the point of noise that makes no sense. Silence all of those and send your spirit among us as we hear your ancient words. Startle us with their meaning and with our ability to be witnesses to this gospel, which is so needed in your world today. Amen.

Acts 2:1-13

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 (FRI-jee-uh) 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.”

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.”

This is the word of the Lord...

Robin Wall Kimmer is distinguished professor of biology and an enrolled member of the Citizens of Potawatomi Nation.

Her recent book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, literally braids together her expertise in botany, the dirty-fingernails awareness gained from getting her hands in the dirt, and indigenous wisdom from her native American tribe, with the skill of a poet.

Her stories of dredging ponds from buckets of what I might call “scum,” to finding the secret of happiness while picking beans, or tapping maple trees for their liquid gold, transport me from my neat suburban life to an entirely new realm.

One story resonated deeply within me – her struggle to learn a new language.

Unless you were raised bilingual, anyone who learns to speak another language knows the difficulty of

substituting a new way of using the alphabet and expressing ideas shaped from infancy.

Learning to put sounds in the back of your throat or high in your nose and transposing word order humbles most people. Languages are intricate and messy, and stumbling through them too often implies ignorance.

When I began to study ministry, my younger colleagues seemed to skip through Biblical Hebrew and *Koine* Greek by flipping through a few flash cards whereas I shed more tears than I care to remember.

Later, a crusty professor barked at me that it is best to learn languages, math, and music while still young. I'm not sure if he tried to console me or tell me that my old mind was not very flexible.

When Kimmer decided to learn the Potawatomi language, she thought, "how hard could it be" since she'd learned so many botanical names in Latin.

Using magnetic refrigerator tiles, like a game of Scrabble, she arranged them to pick up the basic nouns.

Then she hit a wall. In English, only thirty percent of words are verbs. Our language relies upon nouns to define the world.

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In Potawatomi, it flips, with verbs comprising more than seventy percent of all words. Intellectually, she knew she needed to master conjugating verbs into tenses present and past, but this requires more than just rote memorizing.

She had to reorient her thinking from naming things to recognizing how they move with life.

Take for example a body of water we would call a “bay,” water from the ocean that is bounded by land.

No such noun exists in her indigenous language. The closest word is the verb translated “to be a bay.” I quote Kimmer:

I ranted in my head. “There is no reason to make it so complicated...A bay is most definitely a person, place or thing – a noun and not a verb.” And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my finger, and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if the water is dead.

When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb...to be a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay”

holds the wonder for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers.

When I read that section, I had to put down her book as my mind races to the many bays I've seen that mesmerized me with water moving.

Kimmer continues with more words only expressed as verbs in Potawatomi:

To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive.¹

And I thought back to my studies. Until I set aside my desire to translate Greek and Hebrew to English and instead began to learn the language from a new perspective, the essence of the original text alluded me and the sentences remained like a jumble of Scrabble tiles.

For example, Jesus' resurrection is often described as, "he was raised." But my Greek instructor spoke at length of the way the apostle Paul's letters describes God's durative, ongoing act of raising Jesus. When we hear or read "he was raised," my instructor taught me

¹ Robin Wall Kimmer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 55.

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to envision, “God raised Jesus, and Jesus continues to rise.”²

The act of resurrection was not a single event as our intellect wants to file into history. God’s act surprised everyone on the first Easter morning and will surprise all of us today with the way Jesus’ body, the church, continues to rise through us.

To attempt to learn a foreign language demands humility. It risks ridicule. It is a disorienting and brave act. When we allow God’s word to inhabit our hearts and minds, we risk seeing and believing in new ways, and we step forward becoming more than we thought possible as a community.

Do you wonder if any of the disciples from the small region of Galilee intended to speak in the native tongue from some distant and potentially hostile land?

For goodness’ sake, they were already jeopardizing their lives to believe in Jesus while living in the empire that crucified him.

On the day of Pentecost when the disciples were infused with a new capacity to speak it must have felt an order of magnitude greater than Kimmer’s “electric current” experience of suddenly knowing.

²*Language Studies: When Greek Tense Makes Sense*, Study Light, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.studylight.org/language-studies/greek-thoughts.html?article=23>.

Scripture describes tongues, “as of fire, rested on each one” and they “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Not all of them managed it — some sneered because they couldn't bear to be bewildered, to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion challenged.

Instead, they retreated into denial: "Nothing new is happening here. This isn't God. These are fools are drunk."³

But for those who allowed God's spirit to move through them, are you curious about what they said with this multilingual talent? Scripture provides Peter's impassioned sermon – in English.

He testified to their shared history as God's people, of the dreams of old men, the visions of young as told by the prophet, Joel, and the promise of salvation.

He told of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as an eyewitness. And he promises a future with the spirit binding them together in a common good.

When Peter spoke, those who listened heard in their native tongue, the most intimate language for ideas to slip into their minds and change their lives.

³ Debit Thomas, “When You Send Forth Your Spirit,” *Journey with Jesus*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3017-when-you-send-forth-your-spirit>

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That day, three thousand were baptized.

The rest of the disciples, established story tellers of Israel's history, now animated with new words, offered their unique testimony of a divine life force, and invited others to join.

Like the wind, their voices traveled to the ends of the earth bringing our church to life.

This morning let's try learning a new way to speak.

Let's consider who we are, not as a noun, but as a verb: to be a church.

When we think of church in this way, rattling us from the confines of a building, we see a collection of people, baptized in the Holy Spirit, who move in and out, mingle among one another.

To be a church means we gather to praise God, to serve, to enjoy one another, care for each other, pray for each other. We enter and leave the building, tune in and out of YouTube, and return back into the wider world, carrying with us God's spirit.

To be a church compels us to tell the story of faith and Jesus' resurrection with our words and how we live.

In the words of Francis of Assisi: preach the gospel and use words only if necessary.

Today we welcomed new members into our church. They are here because someone from Westminster spoke or acted in a way that invited them. Someone told of this faith with a vision for the future.

Each of our new members brings with them a faith history, of former congregations, prayers, priests, traditions, and beliefs.

Some come with Catholic ritual embedded within. Others, a history of Methodism and Presbyterianism. Some like to sing. Others care about governance and mission. All want to be open to God.

And they bring their passion. By their presence, we are charged with new life. Like the bay with water ebbing and flowing out, coming from different sources, and yet becoming one body, we are alive in constant movement.

From that first Pentecost, the spirit swirls through the world, touching all corners and all hearts with a fire to be alive with Christ.



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