

“Speak”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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Pentecost Sunday

Habakkuk 3:2, 16-18
Acts 2:1-21

Our New Testament lesson comes from the book of Acts 2:1-21. It is the story of the day of Pentecost. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” 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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’ clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: “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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Our scripture lessons for today were put together for a reason though they represent very different times in the history of the people of faith. Today is Pentecost Sunday- the birthday of the church- so our New Testament reading is both obvious and familiar. It is a story that has to be told. Each year on my birthday my mother without fails reminds me of the story of my own birth which apparently can be summarized in one line because that’s all she ever says of it: “Fourteen hours of un-medicated labor.” So today we celebrate the birthday of the church, and the story has to be told. On Pentecost- not a new word- literally, “the fiftieth day” which was at the time and is now the Jewish celebration of the fiftieth day after Passover when it was said that God gave the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai- On Pentecost appropriately God does a great thing- he unites a group of individuals into one body by putting the same Spirit of Christ in them. Thus, the church. Though we don’t hear about any labor in this birth narrative, there is certainly a lot of drama. There are ecstatic experiences- the burning of hearts in the crowd that gathered, startled by a noise that must have sounded something like a hurricane- no gentle breeze or still small voice here. And there is the tingling of ears as everyone within earshot in this international city suddenly hears a bunch of uneducated, holed up locals who worship some guy they claim rose from the dead preach in their native dialects. And most spectacular of all, God is undeniably present where it was never before thought possible and in ways even those closest to Jesus could have never imagined. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Still others found it down right unbelievable. What is happening among these people is too incredible to be real, they muttered, they must be drunk.

And then there is Habakkuk. Writing at a time about 600 years before the birth of Christ when Israel had again been led astray by a violent and idolatrous king. And so as punishment God allowed Israel to be sacked by the Babylonians as a way of saying, well, if I can't compel you to follow my rules, your punishment is that you'll be forced to follow theirs. Listen to that Old Testament text again: "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy. My lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

One is a text that speaks of incredible scarcity. And the other unimaginable abundance. And it is probably no contest as to which we tend to identify with the most. The one is a prayer that articulates the feelings of the people of faith for centuries. Lord I know that you have acted in mighty ways in the past. I need you. Won't you act mightily now too? The other a snapshot of the church that we pull out once a year on its birthday to celebrate a drama that seems impossibly far away. Though Habakkuk wrote in a very different context he articulates an experience that the people of God from ancient times to the time of that first Pentecost up to our Pentecost now have known quite well. An experience of faith that has grown accustomed to yearning for the great displays of God's power of the past to come alive today and set things right. An experience of faith that knows the world is not as it should be and constantly longs to encounter God. An experience of faith that has grown so content with identifying all the ways in which God does not seem to be at work, that it becomes suspect when it sees something that would indicate that he actually does. We are certainly far more familiar with the question, 'is there any hope?' as a society, as a church and as individuals than we are with speaking in tongues or seeing the exponential work of the Spirit. And so it seems that in many ways this Pentecost experience was actually dropped right in the middle of a Habakkuk world.

Having just returned from our mission trip to Haiti I cannot help but read these passages through the lens of that experience because it is so perfectly paradigmatic of the juxtaposition of these texts and the reality of a Pentecost experience colliding with a Habakkuk world. When I last stood before you on Global Mission Sunday back in February I shared a little of the desperation we encountered in Haiti over a year ago and having now just returned I can say of Haiti that there are still no grapes on the vines, no produce in the fields, no sheep in the pen or cattle in the stalls. Where the land was once saturated by the results of hurricane after hurricane the entire region of Bayonnais where our partners in faith reside is now being choked to death by drought that set in as soon as the rains stopped back in the fall. Haiti just can't get a break. Leaves on the few trees were caked with dust and the vast hills covered with cactus where there was once rainforest are sandy and parched- making Haiti look much more like the Mojave Desert than it does a Caribbean island. Recent elections had been sabotaged by the corruption of a few resulting in a familiar bottom line- moneys intended to make their way to the people line the pockets of the elite. The city of Gonnaives is still

digging out after being mostly submerged by about nine feet of water for weeks. In so many ways Haiti is the embodiment of a Habakkuk world. There are no resources. There is no justice. There is no end in sight. God, we know the mighty acts that made you famous. Could you do some of them again now?

When our team arrived, Actionnel, the pastor there, was eager to show us the work of their ministry that is not only transforming the lives of the children in the region it is changing the face of Bayonnais. Not only are the students there consistently outperforming their urban peers on National Exams, but they are also not dying of malnutrition like so many children in Haiti thanks to the child sponsorship program and the contributions of churches in the Carolinas. A granary that Actionnel had the vision to build in 2008 though there was no grain to fill it with at the time now supplies food to 200 men and women daily in exchange for their work rebuilding the road that had been washed away by the storms, making them employees of sorts of OFCB because they are paid with their grain, but also of themselves, as Actionnel says, because it is their road they are building using materials we helped purchase. With crops long washed away and seeds now planted too thirsty to grow, the granary predominantly keeps the families of the region alive with those 200 individuals taking the grain home to feed an average family of seven. It was stocked with the funds that you and others sent for disaster relief last fall. On Sunday morning you would be hard pressed to find a place in the pew in the church whose roof you put on ten years ago.

But for all that is taking place in Bayonnais, perhaps the most incredible part of it is that Actionnel and the other ministry leaders and people there, who collectively describe starvation as the feeling of drinking clorox or battery acid, so intense is the pain that sears their stomach and bowels because of it, are looking to help others who are even poorer than they. The mountain people are considered the lowest common denominator in Haitian society. OFCB students get made fun of when they travel to town to take their national exams. So you can imagine what that means for those who are up the mountain even from the mountain people. "We are poor," Actionnel said. "But the people of Nicolas are even more poor. I know that it is almost impossible to imagine, but it is true. And God has showed us that we must help them. Tomorrow I want to show you what God is doing in Nicolas with your help."

So the next morning at about five am our team, bleary eyed and covered with sunscreen and bug repellent and loaded down with water set out along the footpath up the mountain, the only way to Nicolas from Bayonnais. As with most things in Haiti, hearing the description of what we could expect and experiencing it were two totally different things. Actionnel had said the walk would be 'strenuous', which was true. But he did not say that it would be virtually straight up, loaded with rocks and boulders, and would cover a vast expanse of terrain that looked something like the surface of the moon. There is a Haitian saying that beyond the mountains there are mountains, and it seemed the mountains rolled on forever as we climbed. Kicking up parched black earth as we went we passed a handful of unsmiling faces. Children walking down the path eyed us with suspicion. Though this looked like a vast uninhabited region, Actionnel assured us that there were thousands there living in the hills, we just could not see them. There were scant trances of life. A farmer with a hoe in the bottom of a dried up creek bed covered in basket-ball size rocks sifted for signs of water. As the hot sun climbed up into the sky, in the middle of nowhere a donkey tied to a solitary tree

and baking in about half a foot of shade bellowed. Any animal noise you hear in Haiti is usually the sound of suffering. It was beginning to feel like a scene out of Lawrence of Arabia as an hour stretched into two and began to encroach upon three and there was not a sign of civilization. Nobody knew where we were going. All that we knew was that the path just kept going up. "Can you imagine anything living up here," someone asked me. "Absolutely not. I just don't see how it's possible." Thinking that this was the path to the Granary that everyone in Nicolas walked if they were to have any food to eat. I was struggling and had eaten every day that week.

Finally, when we were quite sure that Actionnel was leading us literally to the ends of the earth, we rounded a corner and saw the first man made structure we'd seen for miles. "We are here!" Actionnel said jubilantly. This was it? I thought. We've traveled all this way for this? There perched on the very top of a hill was a small, simple, rectangular sun-baked stone structure. With white walls of light grey rock and cement with a tin roof it was unimpressive to say the least and it sat in the middle of no where. It resembled what I imagined Noah's ark must have looked like after it had been tossed about by the flood for 40 days and then settled on top of a mountain, the only sign of life in all the world. Perhaps 40 feet by 15 feet in dimension the only other structure in sight was a small stick and thatch hut not much bigger than this pulpit, just a few feet away. Outside that hut were two women talking with a child at their feet, and inside a large black pot bubbled on an open fire. What is this place, Actionnel? I asked. "This is the school." And this? We asked, pointing to the hut. "That's the cafeteria." He said. Of course. Thinking that this might later be regarded as one of the more dubious points of our mission trip, our team made its way to the far edge of the structure and peered around to the other side. It seemed that all the oxygen in Haiti was sucked out of the country because of our group's collective gasp. Instead of stone, the opposite wall was comprised of a series of large, densely woven straw curtains that bulged out from the building, bursting at the seams because the place was filled with children. Over 100 children. Tiny, elementary school age children. Packed into this building like sardines overflowing the wooden benches within, lining the walls, sitting on the floors, in their little OFCB uniforms crammed into three classrooms separated by straw mats each with a chalkboard and undoubtedly the most committed teachers any of us had ever seen- they make that round trip walk from Bayonnais every day and a pastor comes each Sunday. Almost on cue one of the classrooms burst into a song and your Haiti mission team burst into tears. God was in his holy temple.

Out there in the wilderness where the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, tongues of fire descended and we heard them singing in a language we could all understand- the language of pure hope.

Pentecost is a powerful thing. And it is real. The Spirit of Christ is speaking in languages that we do not know and in ways that we cannot possibly imagine. God is undeniably present in places we never thought possible. This is Pentecost today, and as followers of Jesus Christ we are a Pentecost people. And with the gift of the Spirit so very alive and well today is also the charge to remember who we are and be who it is that we have been called to be. We are a Pentecost people in a Habakkuk world. Empowered by the Spirit to participate in God's mission by speaking a word of hope when we are surrounded by every evidence to the contrary regardless of our station in life. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit can

say in every circumstance that though the vines are bare and the wilderness vast I will yet rejoice in the Lord. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit will not rest as long as the world is not as it should be. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit will not succumb to lamenting about how God used to act in the past but will do everything in our power to be a part of his activity now. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit can look every economic indicator and commentator in the eye and say that I do not place my trust in your forecasts I place my trust in God. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit can stand by the graveside and proclaim resurrection. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit do not mind the charge of drunkenness because the influence of Christ's love in us is supposed to affect the way we think, the way we speak, the way we walk, and the way we encounter the world. We are a Pentecost people who by the Spirit are equipped to speak about God's deeds of power even when our own lips tremble. Because the Spirit of Pentecost is in us and it is real.

Author Marianne Williamson writes, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us ...You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."¹

The vines are certainly bare these days. Signs of scarcity abound and the wilderness is vast. But there is something contagious about this Spirit of Christ Jesus in us. Perhaps because it like him is filled with irresistible grace and speaks in a language of hope that everyone can understand. And in every circumstance hope sets us free. While we may tuck the birthday celebration away for yet another year, we cannot table the reminder of what we have been given and who therefore you are called to be. A Pentecost people equipped by God's Spirit and charged to take it to a world in need. So speak about God's deeds of power in any way that you can. His people are listening. Let us pray.

O Lord open our lips and our mouths will declare your praise. Lord we thank you for the gift of the Spirit of your Son that unites us as individuals that we might become one family of faith. We pray for our world hungry for a word of hope and we ask for your courage not just to name the scarcity that we see around us but to proclaim the abundance that is available in you. Help us to be prophets of a better day, and equip and embolden us to be agents of your healing and hope in the world. For such was your son Jesus Christ. And so indeed we are. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

¹ <http://www.peterbdaniel.com/haiti.html>