

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Language of the Spirit**

Acts 2:1-13

I don't know who originally came up with the name of our church newsletter, "The Communicator," but they certainly hit on a key part of our congregation's life and mission—communication. Communication within our fellowship of believers and communication beyond our fellowship of believers. Without communication, we can't form the connections that give cohesion and strength to our congregation. Without communication, we can't connect with the surrounding community and the larger world beyond the walls of our weekly gatherings. Communication is critical. We've become even more aware of that during this past year, relying heavily on technology to help us stay connected and to participate in the life of God's people.

Earlier this week, we updated the message on our church sign. Church signs are a good example of how we aim to communicate, to speak both to God's people and beyond God's people. We want you as participants in the congregation to be informed, inspired, instructed, or encouraged by what's on the church sign. But we also want those words to convey something to the huge numbers of people who pass by our church on Highway 210 every day. Through the church sign, we communicate with people both inside and outside the community of Jesus' followers.

If the first followers of Jesus had a sign outside their place of gathering, it probably would have said, "Waiting." That's the essence of what they had been doing. Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the gift the Father had promised (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). At the right time, God's time, they would receive "power from on high." This power would come in the form of the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, a feast celebrating the harvest and the giving of the law to Moses, God fulfilled his promise. The Holy Spirit filled the community of Jesus' followers and sent them out beyond the secure confines of their own fellowship. As author Garrison Keillor has summarized the book of Acts, "The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward."<sup>1</sup> Now someone from the congregation would have to go out and change the message on the sign from "Waiting" to "Witnessing."

In today's text, this witnessing takes the form of speech. Jesus' followers voice the gospel to the public. Doing so doesn't require a special heavenly language imparted to them by the Spirit. No, it's fine that they use their own local Galilean dialect. That's their language. That's how they talk. And just because they talk that way doesn't mean that other Pentecost pilgrims from other regions can't hear and understand. The Holy Spirit makes sure of that. When Jesus' followers start speaking, everyone hears the words, all at the same time, in their own native languages.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's miracle isn't a healing, an exorcism, or the feeding of a multitude. On this occasion, the Holy Spirit works a wonder of communication. Communication across language barriers. Communication that connects and unites racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people, joining them to the people of God who all call upon the same Lord, Jesus Christ.

The story of Pentecost reminds us that the God we worship and serve is a God who comes close, gets local, and speaks our language. God came to us in human form through Jesus. God chose to use the language of incarnation in order to communicate with us, reveal himself to us, and give himself to us.

Author Max Lucado tells about occasions in Brazil when he served as a translator for an English speaker. Lucado says:

He stood before the audience, complete with the message. I stood at his side, equipped with the language. My job was to convey his story to the listeners. I did my best to allow his words to come through me. I was not at liberty to embellish or subtract. When the speaker gestured, I gestured. As his volume increased, so did mine. When he got quiet, I did, too.

When he walked this earth, Jesus was “translating” God all the time. When God got louder, Jesus got louder. When God gestured, Jesus gestured. He was so in sync with the Father that he could declare “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11, NRSV).<sup>2</sup>

If Jesus translates God to us, we shouldn’t be surprised that following his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus comes to us in an even fuller way through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who takes the gospel and translates it in ways that make Jesus accessible to people from all national, racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. All the while this God who comes so close, and works so locally, always has his eye on his great, global, cosmic project of bringing all people groups into one new humanity in Christ.

Seth Godin tells about how UNICEF spent a fortune creating posters aimed at mothers in Rwanda to raise awareness about the need for childhood vaccination. A friend of Godin’s writes: “The posters were gorgeous—photographs with women and children with simple messages written in Kinyarwanda (the local language), about the importance of vaccinating every child. They were perfect, except for the fact with a female illiteracy rate exceeding 70 percent, words written in perfect Kinyarwanda made little difference.” What soon became evident was that the way messages spread in Rwanda was by song. One group of women would sing a song for another group of women, both as a way of spreading ideas and as a gift. In other words, no song, no message.<sup>3</sup>

As followers of Jesus and witnesses for God’s kingdom, we always have to pay attention not only to the message we communicate but also the medium in which we communicate it. For centuries, the message about Jesus has been spread into diverse cultures in diverse ways. Yes, there have been times and places where those who have gone forth to promote the gospel have been insensitive to or disrespectful of local cultures, have damaged or destroyed indigenous ways of life, and have carried out their ministry in ways that are contrary to the will and way of our Lord. But at the same time, so much of the labor to get the gospel out to the world has been genuinely enabled and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, showing us how to express the good news in local terms and local forms, without stampeding over people and places who have been made by God and redeemed by God in Christ.

Earlier this week, I received an update on one of the ministries that our church helps fund through the International Mission Board (IMB). Jay and Kathy Shafto, who serve in the Congo Basin of Sub-Saharan Africa, are reaching people groups who have never heard the gospel in their own language. They lead an oral Bible storying project that equips believers to share the stories of Scripture in their own heart language. These Bible recordings have even been used beyond the Congo Basin. While on a stateside assignment, one IMB missionary met a pastor who was originally from that region of the world, and showed him a recording of the Bible stories. The pastor exclaimed, “That’s my language! That’s the Bible

in my language!”<sup>4</sup> His declaration was an echo of the exclamation from the Pentecost crowds in Jerusalem: “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (v. 11).

During today’s Missions Moment video, you saw how the Holy Spirit has enabled church planter James Amar to reach 24 unreached people groups living in a suburb of Atlanta. One of the keys to that fruitfulness has been the communication of the gospel in the language of those people groups. Amar said, “We came to another nation without knowing anything. We didn’t know people. We didn’t know churches. But God connected me with the right person.” That’s part of the work of the Holy Spirit, forming connections and facilitating the communication of the gospel. The Spirit is the one who enables both the speaking and the hearing of the good news.

These are glimpses of what God is doing in other parts of the world, and here in our own nation. We need to be aware of how God is working “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). But what about even closer to home, in our own local “Jerusalem,” this part of the world where God is sending us? Our community has developed and changed over the years. The local context of our church’s witness is dynamic and unfolding, more diverse than in previous decades. So we have to continue being discerning about and responsive to the Spirit’s leadership, engaging our community in ways that connect with its population, its needs, its issues, and its concerns. In the broad sense, we have to speak the language of our day and time, communicating the gospel in word and deed as our lives are gathered into the Holy Spirit’s work of translation.

Sometimes the Spirit will enable you to communicate the gospel in the form of a verbal witness. Sometimes your witness will take an even more embodied form, as your daily way of living, your actions themselves, transmit the reality of God’s reign to others. Biblical scholar H. J. Cadbury, a Quaker, was one of the great translators of the New Testament. During World War II, he spent most of his time rolling bandages with the American Friends Service Committee. Someone came up to him and said, “Dr. Cadbury, don’t you think it’s a sad thing that you’ve given up translating the New Testament for this?” Cadbury replied, “I am translating the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup>

The Spirit who came upon Jesus’ followers during Pentecost in Jerusalem still comes upon us to make us more skilled at the work of translation. The Spirit enables us to communicate the good news in a contemporary context where language takes many forms. The languages spoken by diverse people in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. The language of technology. The language of music and the arts. The language of science. The language of the marketplace. We need the filling of the Holy Spirit to help each of us individually, and all of us together as a congregation, to know how to be faithful communicators of the gospel in the specific contexts where we’re following Jesus, day in and day out. Most of all, we need the Spirit’s help to speak the language of mercy, the language of compassion, the language of reconciliation, and the language of redemption, through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, “My Five Most Important Books,” in the “Life in Books” section of *Newsweek* (December 24, 2007) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Seth Godin, *Tribes (Portfolio, 2008)* 124.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Finch, “People group in Congo Basin share Bible stories in heart language.” IMB website. May 12, 2021. <https://www.imb.org/2021/05/12/people-group-congo-basin-share-bible-stories-heart-language/#msdynttrid=P-NvjJ-qfXV1fiZKLYeUQN8inbvrXTV4UkgZyT5hhy> (May 19, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> As told by Peter J. Gomes during The Sunday Forum, March 4, 2008, at the Washington National Cathedral.