

Kenny Silva – Acts 2:1-12 – Say What?

[Begin with Babel Story for kids from Jesus Storybook Bible]

Communication is hard, especially when you don't speak the same language. But even if we're not dealing with a language barrier, there are all sorts of ways in which our words fail us.

Take this sermon, for example. I've spent hours praying and laboring over these words, but the chances are better than not that I'll either flub one of my lines or say something that sounded so good in my study, yet comes off as utter nonsense from the pulpit.

I don't care how slick you are, communication is hard. That's just how it goes. But here's the thing: you and I are made for it.

In the Trinity, there has always been communication—an eternal conversation in which the Father, Son, and Spirit share their life and light with one another. Out of nothing but His sheer good pleasure, God decided to bring another conversation partner into the mix. So, He spoke this world into being and created human beings to be His mirror images—a people who use our works and words to reflect His light as we multiply and fill the earth. (Gen 1:28)

But in Genesis 3, all that goes haywire.

Our words fail us as the Serpent tempts Eve, she misquotes God, and Adam waits silently on the sidelines. The consequence? They eat the forbidden fruit and get chucked out of the Garden.

But in that, God did not revoke their original mission; humanity was still to reflect His life and light into the world through the works of their hands and the words of their mouths.

For the next several chapters in Genesis, we see that mission unfold in fits and starts...

Some righteous people use their works to glorify and their words to call upon the Lord, but unrighteous men like Cain and Lamech use them to destroy. Eventually, the sin becomes so great that God is forced to send a flood and reset His creation project.

But again, humanity's mission is not revoked. When Noah steps off the ark, God renews His covenant with him and his family, giving them the same words He gave Adam and Eve in the beginning: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." (Gen 9:1)

Eventually, God's images would do just that, but not without going through Babel first.

The Babel story begins with a mass of people who all speak the same language. That seems like it would be a helpful thing as they work to fill the earth, but it isn't. Instead,

that unity of speech allows them to settle down in one place and build a tower high into the heavens.

Never mind what God said about making His name known in all the world; they wanted to make a name for themselves.

Well, how'd that go for them? Kids: thumbs up or thumbs down?

Thumbs down.

When the people finished their tall tower—you know, the one was supposed to reach up into the heavens—God had to step down out of heaven just to see it...

And when He did, He said...

⁶ “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.” (Gen 11:6-8)

There’s a lot we could say here, but I want us to see one thing before we get to Acts.

God confused the people’s language for a reason. It’s not that their common language was a bad thing; it’s that they made a bad use of it. Instead of using their words to fill the world with the knowledge of the glory of God, they used them to make a name for themselves, to huddle up in one spot and try to climb their way up into heaven.

So, God mixed things up. He confused their language, and dispersed them over the face of the earth... He punished them, but only so that they could get about the work that they were created to do.

Today, we’re looking at a passage in Acts where God’s people gather together in one place and He steps down out of Heaven to do some more work on their language.

Only this time, there is no punishment. There is only empowerment. God does not restrict their communication; He opens it up for the sake of His Kingdom program.

With that in mind, I’d like to invite you to open your Bibles to Acts 2. As you turn there, I want to briefly remind you of how we got here.

In Acts 1:1-11, we saw Jesus with His disciples in the days between His resurrection and ascension. During that time, He taught them about the kingdom of God and ordered them to wait in Jerusalem until the promised Spirit would come.

And as Casey showed us last week, vv. 12-26 tell us what the disciples did as they waited for the promise. They looked back at God's kingdom work throughout their history and did their best to align themselves with what they thought would come next.

Now, in chapter 2, we come to that day when the promised Spirit finally arrives.

So, let's read it:

Acts 2:1-13

1 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." 12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

To help us get a handle on this great event, I want us to focus on three things today:

1. The Signs of God's Presence
2. The Spirit of God's Fullness
3. The Speaking of God's Goodness

So: the signs, the spirit, and the speaking. Let's begin with the signs.

In v. 1, we see that all the disciples were gathered together on the Day of Pentecost.

Now, Pentecost was one of 3 annual Jewish harvest festivals (Deut 16:16). During this time, Jews would stream into Jerusalem from all over the known world.

Keep that in the back of your mind; it'll be important later.

For now, there's something I want us to see in v. 1 that isn't exactly clear in our modern translations. In most translations, it'll say something like 'When the day of Pentecost arrived,' but the original Greek uses an interesting term that means something more like 'to fulfill.'

So, you might translate it like the King James: "When they day had *fully* come."

Luke uses this same language elsewhere in Luke 9:51, when he tells us that Jesus' time on earth was *fulfilled* and He set his face to go to Jerusalem. Paul does, too, in Gal 4:4, when he says that "when the *fullness* of time had come, God sent forth his Son."

All this injects a level of intentionality into the timing of this event. It's not that it just so happened to be Pentecost when the Spirit came down. No, this was *the* precise moment God had been waiting for. He had a plan, and *now* was the time for Him to enact it.

The disciples may have been growing impatient, but God was right on time.

In v.2, God shows up in grand style when a sound from heaven comes like a mighty rushing wind and fills the house where the disciples are sitting. Now, you might ask yourself, what does wind have to do with anything? Jesus promised the Spirit, not a hurricane.

Fair enough, but in ancient languages like Hebrew and Greek, the word for spirit was commonly used for wind or breath. In fact, you can't even say the Hebrew word *ruach* or the Greek word *pneuma* without mimicking the sound of wind or breath.

So there's this tight link between Spirit and wind in the Bible. Just think back to Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:

"⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

At Pentecost, the wind of God's Spirit blows and the disciples most definitely hear its sound.

This reminded me of a tornado that passed by my mother's house about a year ago. We were on a video chat when she described the intense sound of the rushing wind. She said it was like a freight train passing by her front door.

Now, my son thought that was the coolest thing ever. But, for my mom, it was terrifying.

And for good reason. In 2011, our church in Nashville sent a team to help out in Joplin, MO after an F5 tornado ripped that town apart. I saw entire houses that'd been picked up and flung across the road, hospitals torn to shreds, neighborhoods leveled.

It was an utter disaster. From what? A mighty, rushing wind.

Well, that's just a faint analogy of the awesome power that came rushing into this room. It was as if the whirlwind of God's presence broke into this house like a freight train, and the disciples found themselves standing right in its tracks.

Now, as if all this wasn't enough, we're hit with another sign in v. 3: fire. The fire is interesting because it gives us an idea about the Spirit's game plan for the disciples.

Throughout the Bible, God uses fire to manifest His presence, purify His people, and send them out on mission. We could offer a lot of examples, here, but consider the prophet Isaiah.

In Isaiah 6, he is literally floored by the awesome presence of God... so much so that he cries out... “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Isa 6:5)

Straight away, an angel takes a burning coal from the altar, touches it to his mouth, and says “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isa 6:6) In the very next scene, God calls Isaiah to go out and prophecy to the people of Israel.

Well, that sounds a whole lot like what’s about to happen here, doesn’t it?

The *tongues* of fire descend to purify and set apart the apostles’ mouths. In the very next scene, they begin to prophecy to the people of Israel in tongues other than their own.

That leads us straight the second thing I want us to see: the Spirit of God’s fullness.

In v.4, it says, the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” There’s that filling language again. We saw it in v. 1 when the time was *fulfilled*, then we saw it in v.2 when the sound of God’s power *filled* the house.

It’s as if Luke is saying that when the time was fulfilled, God’s people were to be filled with the Spirit. And it’s out of the fullness of His presence and power that they were to go forth and speak on His behalf.

This kind of thing is all over Acts.

In chapter 4, Peter is hauled before the council and before he can say a word of self-defense, he’s filled by the Holy Spirit.

Later, we see believers filled with the Spirit so that they could speak the Word of God with boldness.

When Stephen stood up for His faith in chapter 7, it says he was “full of the Holy Spirit” (7:55).

We could go on and on with this stuff, but the point is that the *filling* of God’s Spirit is crucial to the missional momentum of Acts. The Spirit fills so God’s witnesses can speak.

For the rest of our time, I want to drill down on that Spirit-empowered speech, because it's in this miracle of communication that we see Babel flipped on its head and God's images invited to take up their original mission to speak God's goodness to the world.

Remember Acts 1:8 when Jesus told the disciples they would receive power to become His witnesses to the end of the earth? Well, in v. 5, that begins to happen.

Here's the kicker, though: it starts with the world coming to *them*. Remember what day it was when all of this went down? Pentecost, one of the annual festivals that brought in Jews from all over the place. So, in addition to the devout Jews who were already living there, v. 5 tells us there were pilgrims in town from all over the known world.

That's pretty cool timing on God's part, but the miracle isn't that all these people are in town to hear the sermon Peter's about to preach. No, v.4 tells us the miracle is that the Holy Spirit filled up the disciples and enabled them to speak in "other tongues." That is, the Spirit empowered these disciples to speak in languages other than their own.

The effect was undeniable. In v. 6, we see the crowds bewildered and captivated by the fact that they were hearing the disciples speak in each one's native tongue.

It's kinda like when I was in Kuwait 10 years ago and I'd randomly meet people who spoke English. It didn't matter who they were or what they had to say; I was all ears.

What makes this even more incredible, comes in v. 7 when the crowd recognizes these disciples as Galileans. You see, Galileans had a bit of a reputation for being uncultured and speaking with a funky accent.

Good, educated folk would cast a sideways glance at them whenever they spoke, kind of like most of you do when I say stuff like 'y'all' or I tell you I'm fixin' to do somethin'.

But here these Galileans are, speaking languages they'd never learned to people from places they'd never been. And they're doing it so well that the listeners in v. 8 take their speech to sound just like what they would've heard when they were growing up.

In vv. 9-11, Luke gives us more detail about just how broad was the scope of this miraculous speaking. It's hard to discern exactly why these nations are mentioned, but the main thing we need to see is just how global this phenomenon is.

In this list of nations, the entire world is represented in seed form.

It's because of the global flavor of this miraculous speaking that Christians ever since the beginning of the Church have viewed this story as no less than the undoing of Babel.

Listen to what John Stott says,

"Ever since the early church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. At Babel human languages

were confused and the nations were scattered. In Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ...

“...prefiguring the great day when the redeemed company will be drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Besides, at Babel earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth” (*Acts*, 68).

Remember our reading from the Jesus Storybook Bible, kids? The people of Babel wanted to climb up into Heaven, but Heaven comes down and scatters them into the world.

Well, Pentecost is the Day when Heaven comes down again

But instead of God confusing their language, He heals it. Instead of cursing their tongues, He sets them apart. Instead of dispersing them out into the world, He pulls them back into Jerusalem.

Yes, there will come a time for them to go out again to the ends of the earth; that's what *Acts* 1:8 says, but that verse also says that their witnessing ministry will begin right here in Jerusalem.

Just as they did at Babel, the people of God have a name to make much of. Only, this time, it's not their own. They have a kingdom to build, but that kingdom does not belong to them.

This is where we begin to land the plane, because in v. 11 we see the purpose of this speaking when the visitors, all in their own language, hear the mighty works of God.

The miracle wasn't some kind of a magic trick. It wasn't just a sign of God's power and presence. No, it was the undoing of Babel and the healing of our tongues so that we can carry out the mission of humanity: to proclaim the goodness of God to all of creation... to speak of His mighty works in a way that captivates and enthralls our listeners.

But God hasn't healed our tongues in the way you or I would imagine. He hasn't stripped away the diversity and given us all some bland universal language. Instead, He's sanctified our differences. Even through all our struggles to understand one another, God's Spirit has provided us a common language called Gospel.

That's why missiologists like Andrew Walls say that the Christian faith is infinitely translatable, because God has declared that His Word would go forth in all tongues to all people groups. Unlike the Koran, the Bible can be translated into *every* language because our God has declared *every* language to be a fit instrument of His praise.

So what do we do with all that? Maybe right now you identify with the crowds in v. 12, who in their amazement and perplexity ask, “What does this mean?” Or, maybe you're

with the guys in v. 13, and you're wondering just what I had in my coffee cup this morning.

If you really want to know what this means, you'll have to come back next week when we start to dive in to the sermon Peter preaches in response to the people's questions.

But before we go I will say this.

Our tendency when we come to stories like this one is to treat them as a kind of fable, written to convey ancient spiritual truths that we then re-package for our modern day.

But that's not what this story is meant to do for us... Luke is communicating history here; he's not telling us to replicate the disciples' experience. He isn't saying we should expect the Holy Spirit to empower us to speak languages we've never learned.

Now, can God do that? Of course, he can. But the point of this story isn't that we should *expect* him to work that way. Again, we're not trying to replicate this once-for-all event.

Pentecost isn't a morality tale. It isn't a set of instructions for the church. No, Pentecost is an origin story. It's more about where we're from than where we're going.

Now, you can't draw too sharp a line between those two things. Where *are* going somewhere, and Acts has a lot to say about what that looks like. But it's only after we've discovered your origin and identity in stories like these that we can then ask Francis Schaefer's famous question: How Should We Then Live?

So, I leave you with this, brothers and sisters.

Communication is hard... speaking the goodness of God to a dark and dying world is even harder. But it's what we were made for. At Pentecost, God showed up in undeniable power through two very public signs of His presence. He filled His disciples with His Spirit and empowered them to break down every wall so that they could speak forth His goodness.

If you are in Christ, it's because you've heard these disciples' words not in their original Greek but in your own native tongue. That couldn't have happened if God had not descended and reversed the curse of Babel. In other words, Pentecost is our origin story.

And, now, the same Spirit who filled these disciples has filled you and me to go speak God's goodness to everyone we meet. He's given us the common language of the Gospel, the Good News about what God has done to reconcile all things to Himself through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our challenge this week is to go out and speak boldly. And the reality is that not everyone will understand us... We won't be speaking their language, if you catch what I mean. We may even sound like drunken babblers.

The possibility and the promise that Pentecost holds out for us that some will be amazed and perplexed. They'll want to know more about this Jesus we talk so much about.

And, just like we'll see with Peter next week, God will give us the words to speak and them the ears to hear.