

Let us pray: God of Wisdom and Word,  
humble us to listen to your stories with open hearts;  
may they write your message on our lives. Amen.

This week's reading from the book of Acts steers our attention toward the power of God.

We hear about God's power coming with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" and "divided tongues of fire," and the amazing experience of everyone who was there understanding each other's language like storytellers.

In spite of their differences, they all understood what the disciples were saying, each in their own language.

This upsets the Hebrew Scriptures 'Tower of Babel' story. (*Gen 11; 4-9*)

In the book of Genesis, the descendants of Noah's son, Shem, have migrated from the east to a plain in the land of Shinar.

They said, "Let's build ourselves a city, and we'll have tower so high it reaches to heaven! ...and we'll make a name for ourselves while we're at it."

God saw the city, and the tower, and heard they only had one language, and God saw they were full of themselves believing they could do anything.

In fact, there was an ancient idea that there would be one universal language for the whole world.

So, God confused their language so they couldn't understand one another, then scattered them over the face of all the earth. The city they left behind was called "Babel"...a Hebrew Word meaning "to jumble."

*(That baby's happily babbling away to herself..)*

In the Genesis story, language divides people, and scatters them all over the earth.

In the reading from Acts, language unites the people. The Spirit of God has rushed in to empower many people of different nationalities to do something astonishing to communicate with one another with complete understanding. Bridges of communication were suddenly built, and the differences among them, instead of dividing them, were amazing examples of just how great the power of God can be.

Underneath the differences of nationality and language, there was a basic unity that was felt and experienced, and brought to life by those who were there that day. It made some of them think there must have been some drinking going on. But those with open hearts knew something sacred was happening, and that a new day had come. Something new was about to happen.

Births are rarely easy, quiet or tidy. The birth of the church is no exception. The Feast of the Pentecost was not created on the day of Pentecost “like the rush of the wind.” The Feast of Shavot was, and still is, a Jewish celebration of the harvest and is associated with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on mount Sinai.

It made a perfect day for the Holy Spirit to make an appearance. The great crowd gathered there, receiving the Holy Spirit, was like a harvest of their own kind and it would lead to greater possibilities for growth and new life.

The disciples, cowering and confused, experience their own kind of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit. The loud wind and fire do not bring destruction, but new life.

We know, with Jesus, something that appears to be one thing can bring about the exact opposite. When destruction is expected - new life springs forth.

As with birth, though it may not be quiet or peaceful, it's exciting, filled with wonder, uncertainty, apprehension.

In the United Church of Canada we listen for a God who is ‘still-speaking.’ When we hear the story of the struggle and danger and misunderstanding the “first church” experienced, we think about the life of our church today. Do we still experience wind and flame? And...what do we hear?

There many languages that divide our churches today, or at least make it difficult to hear one other.

The word “language” doesn't always refer to the spoken word or the many dialects or nationalities of others. We also have in our society the language of economics education, religion, cultures, even personality types.

The same might be said for other boundaries that divide churches. Ecumenical and inter-faith conversations can be easily misunderstood. Multi-cultural, multi-racial, and inter-cultural ministries, and even the languages we use in our own homes, can make things complicated and raise sensitive issues.

The church is an ‘always teaching’ place. Clergy understand they represent God and the church (fortunately, or unfortunately), and the things they say have an impact on the those who hear them. And not only what the clergy says about us, but what do our church buildings say about us?

Are there churches with a sign on the lawn that says, “All Are Welcome,” but the only entrance is a set of stairs? Do we profess the Holy Bible as the foundation of our faith, and then set it aside after Sunday morning? Are there even Bibles in the pews? ...in many churches there are only hymn books *(not withstanding technology)*

All of these, and many other signs, are clues to what we believe and how we hope to present ourselves to others. But do others understand “our language”? Are we making ourselves clear?

Consider, if all of us, members and visitors alike, understood the liturgy (order of service, what comes first, etc.) and what the worship leader was saying, -would it bring us a sense of unity?

The liturgy is a considered part of the message, hoping to guide us to listen for the Holy Spirit, and make connections to our faith, to God. Do visitors know what the ‘bulletin’ is for? How to use it?

Have you ever found yourself sitting in church and nodding in agreement with the pastor, when you catch the eye of the person next to you, and they’re smiling and nodding in agreement, just like you are... “Yes, I see you get it, too.”

You have found Common Ground, a Common Language.

*(“.....Now you’re speaking my language!”)*

But, there are times when we miss what a person is saying, we didn’t hear it, or we didn’t understand it. Maybe even pretended we didn’t hear.

How do we reach across all the differences in our world to hear what the Still-Speaking God is saying?

How do we hear the call that may amaze, or confuse us more than ever?

And, if we do feel confused, how do we stop ourselves from being fearful, or feeling bewildered and mystified, how do we stop ourselves from the very human reaction to the Holy Spirit? I don’t think we can stop these feelings, but we might be able to learn from them.

Rev. Kate Huey asks, “Have there ever been times in your church life that you have needed the power of the Holy Spirit to draw you out of being

“all together in one place”? and needed help to be sent out with courage and energy to share the good news of the Risen Christ?”

Maybe you have experienced a time of crises, or had an important decision to make and there was so much human noise and electronic chatter that the Spirit could not be heard, nor the voice of the Still-Speaking God.

There isn't much in our world today that can astound or shock us. We've seen it all on TV, in newspapers, in books, in Netflix-movies online. Special effects rarely impress us anymore. They're just a normal part of our culture.

We expect new and amazing things to keep happening as a matter of course.

We need to be entertained twenty-four-seven.

We expect things to get better and bigger and we expect them to keep coming.

So, what does it take to impress us these days?

What would cause us to be "amazed and perplexed" as the disciples and the others were on the first 'Day of Pentecost' in the Christian Church?

Do we even notice the astonishing things that are happening in our churches, in the life of this faith community?

God does indeed do wondrous things; if we have eyes to see, and ears to hear.

If we do our best to understand the Languages, (not just the Spoken word,) that are all around us, just maybe we'll 'hear' the Holy. 'feel' the wind.

And when we're asked by someone who's not quite sure what we said, asked us if we've had too much wine,

we'll say, "It's only 9 o'clock in the morning!"

....as if that solves everything.

Let us pray:     Come, Holy Spirit, breathe upon us and fill us with your gifts.  
                      Open to us your guiding words and deeds.  
                      Grant us true knowledge of all forms of speech on earth,  
                      and fit us for serving your holy world.  
                      Amen.