

Spirit of Adoption

It wouldn't be Pentecost without at least reading the Acts 2 text. So, we'll listen to that again this year, but we'll also listen to the psalmist describe the movement of the Spirit in Psalm 104:24-34 and 35b. As a bonus, we'll even give a brief nod to the Romans 8:14-17 passage. So, buckle up!

“There go the ships” (Psalm 104:26 NRSV)—a great Pentecost opening line, don’t you think? “There go the ships.” A follow up from the Memorial weekend event in Indianapolis, “Start your engines!” A taste of the summer to come with the kiddos shouting, “Look-it, mom, look-it!” “There go the ships,” writes the psalmist. And our breath is taken away as a whale breaches and splashes down in the waves – “the Leviathan that you formed to sport in it!” “Look-it! Did you see it?”

Maybe that should be the watchword for Pentecost this year: “Did you see it?” When the Spirit blows, all kinds of things happen. Maybe we’re so conditioned to look for what’s wrong that we miss the activity of the Spirit in the world around us. We miss the movement of nature, the sporting of creatures almost impossibly huge playing like puppies in the rolling waves. They owe their existence and this exuberance to the Creator. And the psalmist implies that this expression of joy and the very life and breath in their bodies are expressions of praise. We get confused as we read the final verses. Is it the psalmist praising, or is it the Leviathan? Or both? Or does life itself bring forth such praise? Surely, it is the human voice here. But does the human voice join a chorus of already singing voices lifted in praise? Is this the new language that we learn?

Acts 2 introduces language into the story. After quickly dispensing with a description of the event – only four verses of a struggle to describe what happened – we are moved to the effects. We can’t describe the coming of the Spirit. “A sound like,” Luke writes; “as of fire,” he mutters. It was wind but not exactly; it was fire but not quite. It’s as if this Spirit stuff is beyond words.

Except words are what carried the day. Luke moves on past the event, as indescribable as it might have been, to talk about the result. Something happened, and then words exploded from each of them. Words, not of confusion or of uncertainty. Words that were unfamiliar to those who spoke but the sounds

of home to those passing by. They were words of welcome, of acknowledgment. They said, “You matter. You are important, in the quintessential you. The contextual you. The native you.” “They were words,” Paul says in Romans, “of adoption.”

But wait, aren’t these words about God? That’s what Luke says. “We hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11 NRSV). They weren’t words about the hearers; they weren’t words about our issues, our concerns, or our hopes and dreams. They were words about God. But the very act of translation says that we care about those who hear. Learning a new language is a form of hospitality. And the disciples didn’t use Babel to teach them how to speak to the multitude passing by in the street. It was a divine approach. We might even argue that it is the reverse Babel (see what I did there?) by using language to connect rather than confuse. The effort was God’s in this instance, a clear sign that we are invited to use whatever tools we have to cross the divides. We are invited, as Paul tells us, to adopt even those who are different from us. Those who speak differently, think differently, or live differently. Pentecost is a call for the crossing of boundaries, for acknowledging differences with grace and hospitality, and for being interested enough in people to learn something new about them.

Some read the “we” in the text from Romans to be an insider word. And it certainly can be read that way. It is descriptive of the life we who have claimed Christ live in community. We are heirs, and we know suffering and glory both. When we lay this text alongside the Pentecost story, however, we need to reevaluate the “we.” The family is bigger than we realized. The Spirit is leading us to places and people we might never have imagined before.

Whom do you see around you? Where is the Spirit moving in your community? Those are the questions that our texts and the celebration of Pentecost ask us. Where are your ships sailing? The psalmist is asking us to raise our horizons. Who has been adopted with you? Paul wants us to see connections. To whom can you speak of the great deeds of God? Luke says go beyond your limits. This Pentecost, let’s be the church at work in the world.