

Incarnate

by

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Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

²⁴O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.

²⁶There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

²⁸when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

³⁰When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works—

³²who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.

³⁵Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more.

Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

In his book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, author, humorist, and unexpected theologian, David Sedaris, writes about the joys of learning a second language.¹ As an adult living in France, he started taking French classes along with other foreigners. It was an introductory class. In his book, he describes the day the lesson focused on holiday celebrations. You can almost hear the halting French, the favored speed of all introductory language classes, students struggling in that awkward phase of knowing words, but really knowing vocabulary. You know that moment. They began to talk about Easter traditions, when a student from Morocco raised the question, “*But what’s an Easter? I mean it, I have no idea what you people are talking about.*” The students looked at one another, and then the teacher said, “explain, explain what Easter is to your classmate.” Their responses were earnest, but as Sedaris offers, they would have “given the pope an aneurysm:”

"It is a party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus."

"... he be die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber."

"He die one day, and then he go above of my head to live with your father."

"after he come back here for to say hello to the peoples."

"He nice, the Jesus."

"He make the good things."

"Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb. One, too, may eat of the chocolate."

As Sedaris explained: *Part of the problem had to do with grammar. Simple nouns such as cross and resurrection were beyond our grasp, let alone such complicated reflexive phrases as "To give of yourself your only begotten son." Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead.*

¹ Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. San Francisco: Back Bay Books, 2001. From the chapter, “Jesus Shaves.”

I think they did a pretty good job considering. If I were dropped in the middle of Germany, with my high school textbooks, I'm not sure I could explain the mystery of the resurrection on command. Indeed, I think it would be something along the lines of, "He nice, the Jesus, real nice."

If we're honest, it's not just learning a second language that takes time to build fluency. Anything worth doing takes time. Do you remember the first time you tried to dribble a basketball? Looked at a sheet of music? That first year sitting with clients trying to give them advice; or talking to patients. Those first few moments as a teacher waiting for the real teacher to walk in after you. It takes time.

I remember when I was a newly ordained youth deacon at my home church. I had gone on visits with another more established deacons, but I will never forget my first "solo" visit. I had flowers carefully seat belted into the front seat. I knew I was going to see Caroline; I had her room number written on a post-it note and written on my hand. I spent the entire drive practicing the prayer I would say, it was very holy.

When I arrived on site, despite having the room number, I couldn't find her room. I went to the wrong part of the complex. Once I found her room, then I couldn't find her—the aid told me to wait, she would be back from physical therapy "any minute now." When she returned, I presented her with flowers, and she welcomed me into her room.

She asked me what grade I was in— somehow, she had figured out that I was the youth deacon— but she wasn't upset, just asked me about classes and high school, and life— which I assumed was very foreign to her at 85 years. I asked her about physical therapy, her grandchildren, and how she was feeling— which felt rather foreign to me as a 16-year-old. When the time came for me to leave, I asked if we could pray. I knew I had to end with a prayer. She said yes, and then my mind went blank. Totally blank. I just stared into her wonderfully kind eyes. My first thought was "God is great God is Good..." thankfully I stopped myself before those words came out.

We don't always get it right the first time out, or the second or the third or fourth or tenth. Getting started is hard. It's why I love the story of Pentecost. The disciples had been waiting for days, trying to figure out from Jesus' vague proclamations exactly when the Holy Spirit would arrive. They didn't know what to expect, what would change, so they were dithering. They were trying to figure out what they should do, how they should do it. I can imagine they were sitting around wondering what this new power would look like, feel like, what they would be able to do. Would the transformation be more like the Hulk or more like Captain America-though I doubt they used those examples. What would these new powers include?

When the Spirit came, it wasn't like anything they had seen before—it was wind inside a room instead of blowing through it. It was fire overhead, instead of in a hearth. Even the words Luke uses to describe the moment are vague—it is *like wind, like fire*. The Holy Spirit didn't arrive with banners and a name tag, didn't arrive wrapped in things that were known and understood. No, the Holy Spirit just arrived.

And then what? Now filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in languages they didn't understand, why was their first instinct to go outside? Why didn't they pause and wait to see if this new translation app was actually working, take a minute to practice first? Why didn't they come up with a plan? What made them so brave that left the room and they started speaking to a street full of people?

I don't think it's an accident that we don't have the text of those first words. We don't have an account of which deeds of power the disciples described. The Bible doesn't tell us what the people heard— if the conjugations were correct or the sentence structure nuanced, if it sounded like poetry or a loud acclamation, or sounded a little more like Sedaris' classmates. Those initial proclamations have evaded the page, but they were heard, and they were transformative. When the disciples walked out of the upper room speaking in new languages – the word became flesh again. The Spirit took on a Galilean accent, put on worn out sandals, and spoke to the crowd gathered.

We call this an incarnation— another moment when God takes on flesh, when God enters the living, breathing, changing human existence. At creation, in Jesus, and here at Pentecost— when the spirit of God enters the church, the people. Here in this third act of incarnation: God is no longer far off, or even apart, God is within us, alive in the actions we take.

God's incarnations are inherently messy— because they're not magical or set apart— they don't glow or come with trumpets announcing their presence. God didn't magically change the disciples—all the artwork we see with the disciples decked out in halos, those were added post-production. They weren't there when the disciples were walking around, they were just ordinary, everyday people. We hear about this enfleshment in the Psalms, when the people sing about God's presence in the breath we breathe, in the world that surrounds us. We see this at Pentecost, when the Spirit comes in power and doesn't break down walls with bursts of light but opens doors with a human hand. Of course, some listened and with a cynical shrug heard only drunk proclamations. But others heard, others listened. They received a word that they needed – they heard God's word not in a language they were still trying to parse. They heard God speak with words that didn't need to be translated.

Do you understand what that means?

God chooses to speak with our twangs and stutters and questionable grammar.

God chooses to act through us, before we know how it's done. When we're still learning the vocabulary, practicing the tricks of the trade.

God chooses to move in this world through *you, in you*.

This is the gift of Pentecost— the outpouring of the Spirit— the exponential expansion of God's incarnation into each one of us. It's something God has already done, but the question is what will we do with it?

Do we then risk stepping out? Do we risk bearing God, carrying God with us into messy and crowded world? Do we risk being made the fool? Of

not having the perfect speech prepared, but speaking still? Do you risk going to a place that is unfamiliar, to work that is uncomfortable, because something deep within you says, it's time to step through that door? Do we trust that the Spirit is present even when the wind isn't whipping through our hair and flames are no longer dancing over head? Do we step out or do we stay... cradling the gifts we have received, and convinced the story is over.

Lesslie Newbigin, British theologian and missionary who spent most of his life serving the global church, argued that sharing the good news was only one half of the equation.² The other half was the in the reception, was in the response of those who heard it. What he observed from his years of service and the history of the church, was the radical truth that the as much as the Spirit was in the work of the evangelist speaking, the Spirit was at work in the one who was listening—the one to takes in the message and makes it her own, for it is in that exchange that church is reborn, takes on new flesh, adopts a new accent , a new way of being, a new incarnation in the world. Pentecost was as much on the street as it was in the upper room.

That is our celebration— our gift— that when we walk out of this space, the Spirit is with us. In our speaking and *in our hearing* the Spirit is at work. In the things we do, and *in the things others do for us*, the Spirit is at work. Some days we get to be Peter, and some days we're the person on the street to who turns at the unexpected sound. In that radical exchange, the Spirit is at work forming us and forming the church again and again and again. Never forget that both parts of that equation require us to leave the safety of what is known; to step out from the rooms where we are most comfortable.

I remember when our seniors were fifth graders, part of me wanted to hold them back and keep them for a few more years so that I could make sure that they were really really ready. I think the same thing about this year's fifth grade class as well, but we've already sent them on... I can't hold them back now. But every year I have had the privilege of watching this group of

² Newbigin developed this idea throughout his writing. Including: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989) and *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1988).

Seniors grow, and serve, and lead, and listen, and act. To see the Spirit moving in and around them. I know that that exchange of the Spirit being at work in their lives and the lives of those around them as they are guided to places, we cannot yet imagine.

All those years ago, when I was holding Caroline's hands searching for the words to say, in a last-ditch effort to say something, I started to say the words of the Lord's Prayer. Caroline said them with me. I know her eyes were open for the entire prayer, because mine were as well. I was watching her, watch me... and it was holy, it was holy as we asked for God's kingdom to come, holy as we asked for our daily bread, holy as the words poured out.

Where was the Spirit that day? In the words, Caroline spoke? In the words, I spoke? In hands held together in prayer? In the flowers, potted and prepared? In the nurse who told me to wait? Or maybe in the ancient words that connected us to generations of believers? Or maybe the Spirit was in all of it. Maybe the Spirit was the incredible thread weaving between the individual parts and marking each one as holy, each one a piece of this new incarnation— of God present with us. Of God speaking to us and through us now and forevermore.