



“Universal Translator”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California**

**Pentecost Sunday
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Acts 2:1–21 (NRSV)**

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

Brenda Loreman

If you were here last week, you may have heard Arlene mention that Luke, as in the person who wrote the *Gospel According to Luke*, also wrote the *Acts of the Apostles*. Scholars suggest that Luke—or whatever his name actually was—most likely meant for the two books to be read together, a sort of two-volume set, the gospel and its sequel. In fact, biblical scholars often refer to the two together as “Luke-Acts.” Somehow in the first couple of hundred years of the early church, the two volumes got separated and placed apart in their current order in our biblical canon, divided by the gospel of John.

When you read the two books together, however, you notice certain features that you might have missed reading them separately. One of these features is Luke’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s gospel, the Holy Spirit first shows up when Jesus is baptized, “descending upon him in bodily form like a dove.” This image, changed, but still similar, is repeated in the early chapters of the gospel’s sequel, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples at Pentecost with a sound like a rush of wind and, “divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” For Luke, the presence of the Holy Spirit was the big deal, a key resource for enabling the fledgling church to carry out its work, the work begun by Jesus at his baptism.

Today, in an attempt to give you a flavor of the first Pentecost and the presence of the Spirit, we have a small chorale of liturgists who have prepared the reading. Listen carefully, and you will hear what the gathered disciples may have heard on that day. Let us prepare our hearts to hear the scripture by singing the first verse of, “Come, Teach Us, Spirit of Our God,” number 287 in your hymnal, while our readers come forward and get ready.

MUSICAL MEDITATION “Come, Teach Us, Spirit of Our God” (v.1)

No 287

Come teach us, Spirit of our God, the language of your way,
The lessons that we need to live, the faith for every day;
The faith for every day.

SCRIPTURE READING**Acts 2:1–21****Michael Foster**

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

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But 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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

SERMON**“Universal Translator”****Brenda Loreman**

Whenever I go see a science fiction movie, especially one in which the crew of some starship meets a bunch of aliens, the skeptic in me always wonders, “Hey, how come the aliens always seem to be fluent in English?” If you’re a Star Trek fan, you know that the Star Trek folks have solved this issue by inventing a device called a “universal translator,” which miraculously inputs the foreign language and spits it out again in 21st century English—no matter where you are in the galaxy. Sometimes I think we need one of these gadgets to communicate with people who speak our own language—do you ever feel like you just can’t make yourself understood, even though you’re both

speaking English? It seems that, whether we're a foreign nation deep in nuclear arms negotiations, or just ordinary folks making our way in the world, we could use a universal translator.

Our scripture today recalls the events that occurred on the first Pentecost celebration after the crucifixion of Jesus. What Luke calls Pentecost refers to the Hebrew festival of Shavuot, a festival traditionally observed fifty days after the Passover feast. It's a celebration that originated to show gratitude to God for the first fruits of the summer harvest. Like all the great Hebrew festivals, Shavuot was a time when the faithful from all over the Near East would return to the center of religious life, to Jerusalem, to celebrate—and this was the reason there were so many diverse countries, cultures, and languages represented in our scripture today. If there were ever a time when it was needed, Shavuot was certainly a perfect opportunity for a universal translator.

For the early followers of Jesus gathered on that day, it was the Holy Spirit that acted as their universal translator, in a rush of wind and flame, as the Holy Spirit swirled among the celebrants. For this small band of the faithful, still mourning the death of their beloved teacher, struggling to continue the reforming work begun by Jesus, living in fear of the authorities, this powerful, chaotic presence of the Spirit must have been a soul-shaking moment. And, just like me watching a science fiction movie, there were skeptics there, too, on that first Pentecost, who sneered and scoffed and suggested that the disciples were drunk, full of new wine.

Despite the skeptics, those early disciples believed that the Holy Spirit had come among them, in fulfillment of prophecy, and gave them the ability to communicate the power of God's love and forgiveness, even to those who spoke in different tongues and came from different cultures.

I imagine there are quite a few of us who remain skeptical, like those first-century skeptics. But I'm guessing there are also a good number of us who have experienced the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The holy spirit may not move through us in a way that allows us to miraculously speak another language—although I'm not going to say here that that can't happen—but I do believe that there are some ways the Holy Spirit descends among us and moves through us and acts as that universal translator, communicating the power of God in a way that we all can understand, whether we speak the same spoken language or not.

For me, and for many people all over the world, the Holy Spirit is definitely present in the language of music. Many have said that music is a universal language, and while some linguists may disagree with that claim, there are some powerful indications that music as a human activity is universal, with deep roots in early human history and a powerful ability to communicate across cultures.

Laura-Lee Balkwill, a psychologist who studies music cognition at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, suggests that music is a universal language, "because it seems relatively easy to blend music of all cultures. If you get a number of musicians together

in a room, it doesn't matter where they're from, they can pick up where one leaves off, they can blend, they can intertwine."¹ Our service today is such an example of musical blending. The hymns and service music were selected for their diversity and representation of the music and musicians of many lands, including South Africa, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, Zimbabwe and New Zealand, as well as the United States.

Even the physical and neurological understandings of music suggest that music is a powerful communication tool. Our physical bodies are ideal for making rhythmic and resonant sounds, from the hollow spaces in our sinuses, to the air-filled space of our lungs, to the rhythmic metronome of our beating hearts. Modern neuro-imaging shows that both hemispheres of the brain are involved in processing music, integrating different aspects of brain function that usually don't talk to each other. It seems that we are created to make music, and music is made to allow disparate entities to communicate.

Music's universal power to communicate starts early, with the music of children. If a child in one part of the world chanted to a child in another part of the world, like this: nyah-nyah nyah-nyah nyah, nyah; the children—even if they had no spoken language in common—would likely understand this common playground taunt. The descending minor third seems to be the first interval that children learn to sing, and it is actually used by anyone who wants their voice to carry. I heard my mother use it countless times: "Brenda time for dinner!" Some suggest that this use of the singsong chant in order for the voice to be heard over a distance was the genesis of sung liturgy and chant in the Christian church, a precursor to hundreds of years of spiritual songs.

But suggesting that sacred music is rooted in the desire to carry the voice leaves something out of the picture. Theologian Don Saliers suggests that, "When we sing, words are given greater range and power than when we speak. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone, [...] that expresses our deepest yearning and dearest joy. [...] There is something about human beings that needs to make music, something that insists on song," Saliers believes. He says:

Every culture sings about the world it experiences, in its own distinctive sound. In fact, we come to know about a people by listening to what they sing and bring to expression in their music. What we sing and how we sing reveals much of who we are, and entering into another's song and music making provides a gateway into their world, which might be much different from our own. Sharing our song with others who do not know us is sharing a gift, akin to the sharing of food at a common table.²

A powerful example of music's power to communicate without spoken language, to cross the boundaries of culture, and, I would suggest, the power of music to embody the

¹ From an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Accessed at <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/allinthemind/stories/2007/1907069.htm>> on May 23, 2009.

² Don E. Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 180-181.

holy, occurred last year when the New York Philharmonic performed an unprecedented concert in Pyongyang, North Korea, at the invitation of the North Korean government. It was the first time a major American orchestra had performed in the communist country.

The program began with the national anthems of both North Korea and the United States, then moved on to a selection of classics from the range of Western classical music, including selections from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Dvorak's "*New World*" Symphony and Gershwin's, "*An American in Paris*;" the orchestra encored with the overture from Leonard Bernstein's "*Candide*," but it was when the orchestra began playing, "*Arirang*," a much-loved Korean folk song known to those throughout both North and South Korea, that something almost magical happened.

Jon Deak, the associate principal bass player for the philharmonic, described it this way:

We had gone through the program, and the audience is very appreciative. They were very polite. And suddenly, there was the, "*Arirang*," which depicts in its text, a man and a woman who are torn apart by circumstances beyond their control. And the obvious symbolism for the North and South Koreans is unmistakable. And it caught us in the orchestra by surprise, and perhaps the people in the audience. We know that everyone was coached and they are very controlled in that country, of course, beyond belief. But, here, we were in a real moment where something undoubtedly escaped control. [...] I can feel when an audience is being polite, being told to be enthusiastic, and when something real is going on. [...] When I saw a woman's face and it looked like she was about to cry, then I started to cry myself and several of my colleagues. We had already left the stage, by the way. And then, this kind of outpouring [was] like the audience [was] catching their breaths, [saying] wait a minute, don't leave. And that's the strong thing that I got from them. And I felt exactly the same thing. Wait, [...] this is too quick. We can't just get on the airplane and go now. Something profound has happened here.³

"Something profound has happened here." Somehow, music became the universal translator that day. Somehow, these two groups of disparate peoples who have so little in common and whose governments are completely at odds with each other were able to communicate their shared humanity. When I contemplate what happened at the concert in Pyongyang, I see the Holy Spirit at work, moving through the universal language of music.

What if we allowed the Holy Spirit to speak for us, and through us, the way it speaks in us through music? What if we allowed the Spirit to intercede for us, as the apostle Paul suggests, with sighs too deep for words, to be our universal translator? Perhaps there would be more examples of strangers coming together, of cultures meeting in the middle, like the musicians in Pyongyang, like the many nations gathered at that first

³ Transcript from National Public Radio interview, March 7, 2008. Accessed at <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87991800>> on May 24, 2009.

Pentecost, who experienced the power of God's love and forgiveness in a wave of sound and song.

And this is the good news of the gospel: the Holy Spirit is among us, moving in us the way that sound and rhythm does, beyond words, expressing our deepest yearning and dearest joy, and communicating to us the power of God's love and forgiveness. Amen.