

Thirty-seven years ago, my husband Woody was assigned to be pastor of an old church in New Haven. The building was an old brick structure in the inner-city. It had high ceilings and huge stained glass windows on either side depicting the apostles and Jesus. From the outside the windows looked black. It was impossible to see the color or even to make out that there were pictures there. When neighborhood people came into the sanctuary for the first time, they were usually astounded. Inevitably they would stand there in speechless for a few moments; the beauty had caught them totally by surprise. Then they would say something like, "Wow! I've been walking past this corner for 10 years and I had no idea that these windows were here!" Not so different from our church here in Winsted.

Stained glass windows need to be filled with the power of light to reveal their potential and their beauty, and in the same way, people need to be filled with the power of God's Spirit if they are going to make any impact on the world. It was at the festival of the wheat harvest--50 days after the Passover--a celebration called Pentecost, that the discouraged, dejected disciples received the power of the Spirit in their lives, and the Christian Church was born. God's power, God's presence, God's excitement filled their lives and made them excited about the Good News that they were to share, so excited that everyone thought that they were drunk--at 9:00 in the morning.

Peter began to preach – Jews from every known land were there for the festival and thus to hear his message – and all of the apostles went out to share with enthusiasm. All of this, of course, was the work--not of people--but of God. God's Spirit came down to a rather tentative, depressed bunch, and turned their lives around as if the sun had suddenly risen on a stained glass window.

Pentecost... Once a year, we try to remember to wear RED and to listen to how the wavering, uncertain disciples of Jesus were suddenly SURPRISED and filled with life and the ability to tell others what God did.

Thomas Hall gave a neat “take” on Pentecost as he wrote: “The words that tumble out of their Jewish mouths are Arabic and Palestinian, Puerto Rican, Zulu, Albanian, rap, rock, and street language, theologically speaking. They are filled with the Holy Spirit, and begin to speak about God in fresh, new languages. ...The story ends with a small group that suddenly mushrooms from a handful to a neighborhood full of Christians because God gives them new languages through which to communicate God’s love.” (*DPS*, on Internet).

So what is God doing today? If we are sitting around expecting God to do something just like he did 2000 years ago, our expectations are surely way too small... The Jewish authorities of Jesus’ day always thought that THEY knew what God would do... In fact, most could not recognize what God was doing in Jesus. A read through the Bible clues us in that God’s ways surprise folks, and tell us that that’s one of the best ways to know that God is at work, when things turn out differently than what we have been expecting. Remember we heard last week: “My thoughts

are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” (Is. 55:8) If we are watching to see what God is doing in this world and even in our lives, and HOW God is using communication to speak the message of God’s love and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ, then we will probably need to move out of what we’re used to, look “outside the box,” and listen with all of our heart to hear the new things, new possibilities, God would do with and through us.

A lot of this has to do with language. Those dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision needed to hear the Word of God tell them to live. Then they did... The breath of God gave them life.

The purpose of the prophecy given to Ezekiel, was to proclaim that the people who felt as though they were dead there in Exile would be given life. Ezekiel was to take this message to the people, a message of hope. But one of the central points of the message was that all of this would come to pass in order that the people would know that it was **God** who was doing this among them. The people were to see that it is God who gives life, it is God who restores life. God's work was to be recognized. This message is relevant for the church today. It is God who is doing marvelous things, God who provides possibilities -- we must get out of the way so that God can work. Let God’s Light shine through our lives....

But this is not so easy. We’ve been told to love God and to love others... We don’t do so well at either. It is hard to love outsiders, and it is sometimes really hard to love our Christian brothers and sisters.

It’s also too easy to let all the stresses of this world and our lives to “knock the life out of us.” Just as a person’s heart may need to be shocked back into proper rhythm, so our spirits often need to be re-awakened and renewed. The words of Psalm 51 often are my most frantic prayer: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (Ps. 51:10)

We who may feel just about dead in our living or in our faith need to hear the Word of God, in such a way that the breath and life can come into our hearts to feed and challenge us. God can speak in language to make this possible. The Holy Spirit provides the utterance that lets us understand...

Language is crucial for communication. Years ago Pepsi put out a slogan, "Come alive! You’re in the Pepsi generation!" It turned out that in China, the slogan translated to say, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead." Not what Pepsi wanted to sell! (pause) Our world is full of words. We hear them on the news, we say them to each other. Words can hurt or help, words can be understood or misunderstood. Words can lead to death or life.

The late writer Christopher Morley once declared, “Life is a foreign language; all men mispronounce it.” The Spirit of God can show us how to pronounce the words of life...

The Rev. Thomas Hall tells of such a lesson. “About two years ago, Jim sat in my office between services. He had made some bad choices-was at the bottom of his class, in and out of jobs, a father at sixteen. He had come for help.

"Jim, I want you to know that this church is going to stand with you. We'll be there celebrating the life of your little baby - nourishing and nurturing it as a gift of God. We'll help you in your faith struggle."

Then, before we ended I invited this kid to help me in the communion for the second service.

So there we were, standing in front of everyone offering communion. Jim with his body jewelry and tie-dyed tee shirt, with that weird symbol of chaos emblazoned on the front. His head was shaved on either side except for the Mohawk pony tail. On the other side was a properly attired church member. Meet the odd couple!

I knew there would be some grumbling, and I was not disappointed. One man and his wife over lunch expressed their anger and disgust. "What do you think you're doing, letting that punk stand up there in his bizarre clothes to hold the cup? You made a mockery of Communion, that's what you did."

I tried to tell them that of all persons, this weak member needed grace. And what better place to be than at the Table serving and receiving grace? I must tell you, though, I felt pretty discouraged that week. Around Wednesday, I received a letter from an older man, a long-time member. "Oh no, another disgruntled member," I thought. I was wrong. Here's a close paraphrase of the letter:

This is a messy church, we never know what's going to happen next it seems.  
Just want you to know that I was so taken with that kid up there serving us at communion. It reminded me why I come here. Because this place like no other, is where grace happens every week." (*DPS*, on Internet)

The work of Pentecost is the sharing of the Word, the Word made flesh in Jesus and the Word of grace and forgiveness, and the Word as we are empowered to share it with others through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Preacher C.M. Noten told of a church with a sign in front declaring: "The sure sign that we are following Christ is that he leads where we did not expect to go." (*Pulpit Resource*, vol. 29 no.2, p. 46)

We cannot tell God what to do with us or this church for Pentecost, but we can pray that we will be able to SEE and hear whatever new God decides to do. And we can ask God to give us new language to share good news with a generation, a society, and an entire world ---- all needing to be filled with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:20) All who need to hear a word of grace, forgiveness, and hope that are only possible through our Life-Giving Lord.

May God find in us persons willing to be filled and led by the Holy Spirit. May the Spirit work in us words that will share grace and hope and surprise - new possibilities - with others. May Christ be praised in our lives. Amen.