

Sermon: New Wine New Spirit

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, June 8, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is Pentecost, the fiftieth day, or 7 weeks after Easter. Traditionally, it is the day that the Church celebrates its beginning. That story is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, where the Holy Spirit descended upon a group of frightened disciples, transforming them into bold proclaimers of God's deed and power, in multiple languages and tongues. According to the Scripture, more than three thousands (and their families) came to believe that day. Thus the first community of Christian faith was born. So happy birthday to you, Church! Two-thousand plus years and counting!

Now I've glossed over an important aspect of this story, for in that gathering of Jews in Jerusalem, as the passage in Acts 2:5 describes, "from every people under heaven", fifteen distinctive names of regions and/or ethnic groups were mentioned—the 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.

Now Luke, the author of both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, could've simply summarized this wide diversity of people, for example: people from the north, the south, the east and the west. That would've been much neater and simpler, but he didn't. He had deliberately slowed down his story telling, by naming these fifteen regions and/or ethnic origins. Why? Why go through all that trouble in the first place?

I got curious. I think he is trying to create the maximum impact to the original hearers, for these distinctive names meant something. Just like when we say Newfies, or Quebeckers, and Albertans, they meant something to us as Canadian. So what do all these distinctive names mean to that 1st century gathering in Jerusalem? So I looked them up, and here is what I've found:

The **Parthians** was a geographical region in the present day northeastern part of Iran. After the Babylonian exile, the descendants of those who decided not to return to Judea had largely settled in this region. They had planted roots and had thrived.

The **Medes** was a region in the western and northern part of Iran. In the Iron Age, a powerful empire arose and consolidated its hold on the region around the 8th century BC. Although widely recognized as playing an important role in

the history of the ancient Near East, they nevertheless left no written records, thus prompting historians to construct their history through other sources such as the Assyrian, Babylonians and Greek.

The **Elamites** are also known as Susiana, a name derived from its capital city of Susa. It was an ancient civilization, in the Middle Bronze Age, located in the far west and southwest of Iran. Written records can be traced back to around 3,000 BC, for they have developed a distinctive cultural and linguistic branch, apart from the other groups in this region.

The **Mesopotamia**, a word in Greek which means “between rivers”, is the region between the Tigris-Euphrates river system. This wider geographical region is known as the birth place of ancient civilizations, with the earliest civilization known in the historical record, dating back to the first half of the third millennium BC. This region in the present day Iraq, as biblical scholars suspected, would also be the long lost location of the garden of Eden.

I will skip **Judea**, **Egypt** and **Rome**, for they are familiar to most of us. So allow me to jump to **Cappadocia**. It is a region in eastern part of the Asia Minor, or present day Turkey. Its better known name in the Old Testament would be the Hittite. After the time of the Acts of the Apostles, Cappadocia would develop as a centre of early Christian learning, with its religious heritage evidenced by hundreds of churches and monasteries. Three famous early church fathers hailed from this region, known collectively as the Cappadocian Fathers. They were Basil the Great who was the Bishop of Caesarea, Basil's younger brother Gregory of Nyssa who became the Bishop of Nyssa, and a close friend Gregory of Nazianzus who became the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Continuing on to **Pontus**. It is a region in the northern part of Turkey, on the coast of the Black Sea. It was a mostly unorganized and ungoverned region, ungovernable even by the war-like Hittites. Pontus was rumoured in the ancient Greek mythology, to be the original home of the Amazons, a society built by female warriors and hunters known for their courage and fierce independence.

Phrygia is located in the west-central part of Anatolia, Turkey. In classical antiquity, a kingdom imposed its rule in that region, with a number of its kings made famous in the heroic age of Greek mythology. Take for example King Gordias, who as the legend goes, had constructed a knot that was seemingly unsolvable. Whosoever able to untie the knot, as the legend goes, would rule the world. Of course, out came later Alexander the Great, who would simply cut the Gordian knot with his sword, and went on to the conquer the known world in his time. And we should not forget King Midas of Phrygia, who would turn whatsoever he touches into gold, thus coining the phrase to this day: the ‘Midas touch’.

Pamphylia, which in Greek literally means “of mingled tribes or races” It is located in the southern region of Asia Minor, on the coast of the Mediterranean. Living in that region were a mixture of aboriginal tribes and Greek settlers who were likely descents of those who had fought in the Trojan War.

Are you still with me so far? I know it’s a lot of geography, but there is a important point coming. Let us now turn to **Cyrene**, located in North Africa, in the present day Libya. It was an ancient Greek colony and Roman city. It was part of a group of five cities in the region, known collectively as the Pentapolis, also known to be important Jewish hubs in the first century BC.

Cretans were people living in the island of Crete in the Mediterranean. It was the birthplace of the ancient Minoan civilization, and the birthplace of the legendary half-bull-half-man Minotaur of the Greek mythology. The Apostle Paul famously said in Titus 1:12, while agreeing with a Cretan, a prophet of their own, who said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” To such, Paul added his own assessment: “It is true!” I don’t know how true, but that was his prejudice.

The “**Arabs**” here refers particularly to the Nabateans, who were traders that controlled the caravan route from Damascus in the north to the Sinai in the south. They also controlled the spice trade to the east and may have gone as far east as China. Their capital city of Petra was nestled in a steep and rocky area, in the current day Jordan. Fans of the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade might recall the scene outside the so-called ‘grail temple’. It was shot in Petra. The Nabateans were polytheistic, but many Jews settled and prospered in their region. Some Nabateans had also converted to Judaism.

I hope I haven’t lost you completely. The point of going through this exercise of listing and dissecting these fifteen distinctive geographical regions and ethnic origins is simply to highlight a point that Luke the author wishes to make in the story of the Pentecost, that God honours this diversity of languages. Not only did God created such a diversity in the first place, God honours it by having the disciples of Jesus, each speaking in different tongues, as the Spirit of God enabled and empowered them, but all proclaiming the same message, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God.

Were they drunk on new wine, as some in the audience had suggested? For the celebration of Pentecost was meant also as a harvest festival, and I supposed heavy drinking was quite to norm. No, these disciples of Jesus were sober as the day, and were filled only with the Holy Spirit, just as the Prophet Joel had prophesied, speaking on behalf of God in the Book of Joel 2:28, that in the last days, God will pour out his spirit on all flesh, that “*your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*”

Being filled with the Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost says something about our God. God does not speak in a universal language. God does not impose nor coerce a superficial unity. Rather, the Spirit of God delights in communicating in every tongue. Every language is set apart, every dialect holy—they are all the incarnation of God’s living Word expressed in a plurality of many tongues. In a way, God affirms the holiness of human differences, not just our languages, but cultures as well. The only unity worth pursuing, is unity in Spirit and unity in Christ Jesus as Lord. The only attitude worth seeking, is to humble ourselves before God, and serve to further the Gospel.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost says something about the disciples of Jesus as well. As instruments of God’s will, they acted like a bridge, bridging the linguistic and cultural divides of that day, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps that is a take-away lesson for us as the Church. How can we play that role of a bridge in this divided and wounded world?

I will leave with you this story of two farmers, brothers who were terrible in getting along. So the older brother contracted a wandering carpenter who happened to be journeying through his land. As the older brother explained to the carpenter, “Just last week, my younger brother dug a wider passage for supposedly water into his own farm. But he ended up creating a very wide creek between our two farms, and I am sure he did that just to annoy me!!”

“So,” the older brother continued, “build me something so that we don’t ever have to stand and see each other’s face from across.” He was thinking something like a fence, or even better, a tall wall.

The older brother then went away on a business trip, and returned a week later. And lo and behold, the carpenter had built for him not a wall, but a bridge. It was a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! And a fine piece of work, with beautiful handrails.

Before this older brother’s shock had the chance to settle in, the young brother crossed over the newly built bridge, with a big smile and a wide embrace, hugging his brother, Saying, “You really are kind and humble my brother! After all I had done and said to you, you still shown that blood relations can never be broken! I am truly sorry for my behaviour.”

Seeing that his work is now complete, the carpenter started to depart. “No, wait!” urged the older brother, “Stay a few more days. I have a lot of other projects for you.” To which the carpenter replied, “I’d love to stay on, but I have many more bridges to build elsewhere.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**