

Longing For New Languages

Acts 2

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on the Feast of Pentecost, 2020

Brothers and sisters, I find myself in an unusual position this morning for a preacher: I am not really sure what to say. We are in week twelve or so of lockdown, dealing with a virus that has claimed almost as many American lives as World War I—a number we will almost certainly surpass in the coming weeks. Twenty-six million Americans have lost their jobs and we are only beginning to reckon with the longer-term economic fallout of this crisis. And over the past few days cities throughout the country have been set on fire with anger and heartbreak because it turns out that even in the context of a global pandemic, when literally all of humanity is united in a fight against a common non-human enemy, that even then the senseless killing of black men by white police officers continues.

More than anything else this morning, I am sad. I miss you. Being a priest doesn't really make sense without you. I know you're still there but if I'm honest this isn't the same. The camera is not as kind as you are. Sure, the camera does not make passive-aggressive comments about me not calling them on their birthday. But the camera does not come forward to hold out their hands to receive the Eucharist. The camera does not sing. It does not struggle. It does not pray. I am sad that we are forced to do church like this. I am sad that some of you are living alone and I can't visit you. That some of you are having surgery and I can't come hold your hand. I am sad that I can't sit in a circle and wonder what this story is really about with our Godly Play kids.

I am sad that most of the jobs governments deem "essential" in the context of a global crisis also happen to not pay very much. That small business owners are put in a position of having to choose between their own safety and their own livelihoods. I am sad that we can live in a society where a global crisis can cause tens of millions of people to lose their jobs completely while at the same time our society's billionaire's make *billions* more. How do we live in a world where the rules allow such a thing as that?

And I am heartbroken, wrecked by images we have all seen over the past few days. I am haunted by the scene of George Floyd gasping the words "I can't breathe." Haunted by the fact that I am hardly even surprised that it happened. I am haunted by pictures of white protesters throwing bricks through windows while protest organizers beg them to stop through their bullhorns. I am haunted by images of reporters, cameramen, and other journalists arrested and fired upon with tear gas and rubber bullets by people whose job it is definitionally to keep the public safe. I am haunted by pictures of police already armed like a military who find yet even more things to use as weapons against protesters like bicycles and vehicles.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do.

I know today is the feast of Pentecost. I know that on the day of Pentecost God, by the Spirit, descended on the disciples and gave them the gift of speaking new languages. I know there was fire on that day too. I think that is my prayer for today, a simple and humble one—both for me as your preacher and us as a church—that the Spirit

would descend on us and give us a new languages with which we can understand. New words that we can hear and new words that we can speak.

We need new words and new ways to process and solve these deep and systemic troubles that our world faces at the moment. I had a teacher who was fond of saying “you can only act in a world you can see and you can only see a world that you can say.” It feels like our existing words that we’re using to process these crises, all of them just shunt us all into categories that don’t fit, trying to convince us that these are still conflicts between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, urban and rural, rich and poor, public and private. Those words don’t work anymore and are no longer helpful. We need new words so we can see new places so we can begin to act to make the changes we all know we need.

My prayer is that a new Spirit-infused vocabulary emerges from the rubble of what our world is going through right now. And the thing is I actually do think it is possible. This pandemic, despite bribing unmitigated disaster and tragedy into our world, also represents a unique opportunity in our lives. Because the combination of unprecedented tragedy and the removal of typical distractions like work, commutes, live sports, and movie theaters has given us a context to do some very basic thinking as a society and as individuals. It gives us as a church an opportunity to consider what we really want the world to know us for.

Deeply entrenched assumptions that felt impossible to overcome even 12 weeks ago are all of the sudden up for grabs. It seems to me that this is part of what is fueling the intensity of the protests over the past few days. Of course, the killing of George Floyd is tragic in its own right, but in this moment, that happening right now, it has also made many of us re-remember that back when things were normal things weren’t all that great. And actually it turns out we don’t have a lot of interest in going back there. When we emerge out into the other side of this we want to emerge into something better. Into something different. These protests and riots are beautiful and awful and complicated but in the most basic sense what we are seeing is a declaration of emergency from below. From ordinary people, like you and me. We are asking ourselves some very basic questions about how we want our society to be ordered and what kinds of values we want to persist into the future.

But here’s the thing. If we want things to change, if we want to be given new languages, we have to be open to the Spirit working in our lives. I have to be open to it. We have to be open to change. We have to be open to hearing new languages from people we didn’t know before now. We have to seek it out. Just a few months ago here at St. Mark’s—even though it feels like years ago now—in the month of February we started a conversation here in Sunday school about black history in America and specifically the legacy of white identity since we are a mostly white church. We learned in that class first of all that being open to the Spirit’s work in our lives is not something that is generally comfortable or easy.

Actually, if we want things to change, we probably need to first see ourselves not in the disciples who the ones miraculously speaking the new languages, but as the others gathered in Jerusalem who are hearing the Gospel for the first time. Remember, the Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak other languages not just for the sport of it. It was because for the feast, the entire world was gathered in Jerusalem. People from everywhere were watching. And God gave them the ability to speak in all the languages represented there so they could hear about God’s deeds of power, so that they could hear the Gospel, so they could hear the good news that the God who first raised Israel out of slavery in Egypt has now raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. You and I remain

isolated for the most part, but in another sense we are all gathered together in this country watching in a way we never have been before.

I don't know how you feel today. If like me you are simply overwhelmed with sadness. Maybe you're filled with anger. And maybe that anger is spilling over into rage. Maybe you're just tired. Or distracted. Or in pain. Or maybe you yourself feel under attack. But as new languages emerge from the rubble of our present crises, I invite you to join me in praying that we might hear God in those new languages, and that over time we might also learn to speak them ourselves. Resist falling into the simple categories that the world wants to shunt us into. We are Christians.

So we should be on the lookout now. Where do we see the Gospel bubbling up in new and surprising places? What do we recognize as God's deeds of power in our world today? There is an overwhelming amount of pain and sadness around us right now. But the images of the past few days have displayed a lot of beauty too, both here in our church and around our world. I wonder where you see it. I wonder where you see those little snippets of Gospel hope that defy simplistic categorization. Let me end by speaking a little for myself, in case you need some help with a place to start.

I see that hope, I see the Gospel, in a group of men at St. Mark's who instead of canceling their weekly Kerbey Lange breakfast simply relocated it to Jim Clark's front driveway. To those of you who have dedicated hours of your weeks to calling households of our community members who you have never met just to say we haven't forgotten you. I see it in the generosity of this congregation—many of you, recognizing that you have been blessedly immune to the economic effects of the crisis—have turned over your government stimulus checks to us to redistribute to those in need. I see it in those of you who have taken this pandemic as an opportunity for your own spiritual renewal—to create new habits of prayer and study. Could it be that we look back and see this moment as the beginning of a new revival in the Episcopal Church?

I see hope, I see the Gospel, I see new languages emerging in the creativity of protesters who rather than destroying buildings and cars in Austin chose instead to stand across I-35 and stop traffic temporarily to remind newcomers to our city that the building of that highway destroyed some of the few African-American neighborhoods Austin had to begin with, and in Denver hundreds laid down on their stomachs on the lawn of the capitol building and in unison for nine minutes put their hands behind their backs and repeated "I can't breathe."

I see it in the faces of the black police officer standing serenely and wordlessly while white protesters scream obscenities in their face. I see it in Flint and Camden where cops and protesters marched together arm in arm. I see it in the groups of Amish people holding signs that say "Thou shalt not kill" and singing hymns. I see it in the face of George Floyd who like Jesus died of asphyxiation at the hands of state-sanctioned violence and who like Jesus will one day rise again.

Come, Holy Spirit. We will try to listen.

Amen.