

Sermon preached at OCC, 8 June 2025

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:25-27

The Sound that connects us to God

"*The Sound of Silence*" is an iconic song by Simon and Garfunkel, popular during the late 1960s and 1970s. Starting with a verse like "*Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again...*", it explores the themes of societal disconnection, the inability to communicate, and emotional isolation (sing stanza three together).¹ The lyrics show that people are talking without truly speaking, hearing without listening, and are ultimately unable to love one another. It highlights how people are alienated from others and become lonely, which is caused by communication breakdowns. It was released in 1964, and it still resonates with us loudly more than 60 years later. We are constantly surrounded by noise—media, conversation, distractions—but very few of these sounds change us. Yet the sound of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost did exactly that: it transformed ordinary people into bold witnesses of Christ, and this is our focus today.

Sounds that confuse people

The Tower of Babel seems quite the opposite of *The Day of Pentecost*. Scholars say that Pentecost is not considered a solution to the problem of *the Tower of Babel*. Diversity, including different languages and cultures, is not a punishment from God. For instance, on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit maintains the diversity of human language by enabling everyone to hear the gospel in their language, not in a single universal language. Diversity is something to be celebrated.

The primary focus in *the Tower of Babel* is on pride and rebellion against God, as seen through a series of actions. First, they aim to build a city²; second, they aim to build a tower in the city that reaches the heavens; third, they aim to make a name for themselves. Fourth, they aim not

¹ (Stanza 3) And in the naked light, I saw; Ten thousand people, maybe more; People talking without speaking; People hearing without listening; People writing songs that voices never shared, And no one dared, Disturb the sound of silence...

² Genesis 11:4

to be dispersed over the whole earth, which is against God's mandate in that they spread out and fill the whole earth.³ To this, God doesn't destroy the city or the tower but confuses them as the issue is not with the building projects but more about the reasons for building. When God confused them, it was through their language. Suddenly, they couldn't communicate with one another, and misunderstanding and miscommunication naturally followed. They had to go their own ways. Being scattered sounds negative as a consequence of disobedience. However, God does not always scatter people. In Deuteronomy 30:3,⁴ it is the first of many times when God promises to "gather" from all the places where God has 'scattered.' When the Spirit comes, God gathers them all again in the truth of God. The confusion at Babel scattered humanity, but at Pentecost, the same diversity of language became a vehicle for unity.

The Sound of the Empowering Spirit

The reading in Acts 2 allows us to hear different kinds of sounds. In verse 1, we can imagine the sounds that would have been made when the people gathered there. There may have been sounds like doors opening and shutting, feet shuffling, the rustle of clothing, and the murmur of voices. Amid ordinary sounds, people heard the sounds of a rushing wind from nowhere. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages.

In Acts 2:5-11, there are sounds of native languages. At least 15 different places are mentioned, each hearing in their language about "God's deeds of power."⁵ It means that each one of them is saying the same thing but in different languages. On the surface, the condition of many different languages is the same as in the case of the Babel Tower. Yet, the different languages may be one of the causes of their failure. Instead, different ideas and ideologies may cause them to be scattered. But that's not all – we see these sounds in the form of different languages that have empowered and liberated people.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit fell upon special people, uniquely anointed for specific tasks. But here in Acts,⁶ the Spirit is much more extravagant. As prophesied in Joel, the community gathered, young and old, sons and daughters, enslaved people, both male and female, all find their unique voices. There is also the sound of people calling for salvation.⁷ There are different

³ Genesis 1:28; 9:1: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

⁴ "Then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you."

⁵ Acts 2:11

⁶ In Acts 2:17-18

⁷ Acts 2:21

types of speech, from the passion of prophecy to the hope of vision. Different from those in *the Tower of Babel*, these voices, visions, and hopes are to bring God's Kingdom here and now as well as in Heaven.

We can see the impacts that the Holy Spirit has brought to people. First, the Spirit removed the fear for the Jews, thereby the concerns about their safety. Previously, they were hiding in the upper room while praying together. But when filled with the Holy Spirit, they couldn't stay or hide any longer, but they went out to the street. Second, to live by the Spirit is to live in some sense at odds with 'the world,'⁸ the sneers from the crowd.⁹ Also, when we live by the Spirit, it doesn't mean life gets easy. Sometimes, it means standing firm when others mock or misunderstand us.¹⁰ What does this sound like in our community of faith?

The Church as the Sound of the Holy Spirit

In *Story Time*, we didn't directly hear the sound of the coming Holy Spirit, but we saw it through all the different colours. We can imagine that it may have been like a gentle breeze, but it transformed into a gusting wind in the hearts of the believers. We may find ourselves in both readings. In the Tower of Babel, despite having a single language, when they failed to understand what God was doing, the confusion forced them to be scattered all over the earth. But in Pentecost, people heard the same thing – the great work of God through different languages.

Last week, Mainly Music celebrated its 35th anniversary, and a Bible was given to each family. We sang the *Happy Birthday* song for Mainly Music and all the families who have been part of this journey so far. I've heard a couple saying how much they appreciated the Mainly Music session, especially the warmth and care they felt from the Mainly Music team whenever they came. They may not understand all the theology, but the Mainly Music songs, a simple prayer song, and a greeting, along with the overall work, told them they were loved. That's the sound of the Spirit at work.

⁸ John 14:17 - "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

⁹ Acts 2:13 - But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁰ Romans 8:17 -and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

The Holy Spirit we have received didn't make us silent, but rather the powerful sound of God, which won't stay still but stirs people confined in their thoughts and ideas, gathering them around the love of God. As people of Pentecost, we celebrate this new life. Let's not be a silent church. Let's be the rushing wind, the prophetic voice, the Spirit's sound in our communities - so that those still living in silence might hear and be changed. Amen.