

Overwhelmed by God

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Pentecost, June 5, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Acts 2:1-21](#)

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10 years ago, I was shopping for a car. I knew I wanted something very fuel efficient that would be a good city car. It didn't take long to decide I wanted a hybrid car, something that would come close to doubling my gas mileage. I eventually settled on a Prius-C. I'd seen one in San Francisco – walked all the way around it while crossing the street and freaked out the driver. It looked good. I checked it out and it got good reviews. If I drove it carefully, I should get around 50 mpg – doubling the mileage I was getting in the *HMC Suzanne*, the car I was driving at the time.

I did a test drive. And ten years ago this week, I bought a car who eventually revealed his name to me: *Jack O. Lantern*. (You can see the back third of the *HMC Suzanne* on the right of the photo.) I figured I was probably the only one in the neighborhood to own a Prius-C, and certainly the only one who owned one in habanero orange.



And then I started seeing them everywhere. Including one right here in Niles – in habanero orange. And that just happens. You don't notice something until you're aware of it. I didn't notice Prius-Cs until I had bought a Prius-C. Well, something similar happened to me this past week.

Since Monday Morning Bible Study, I've been thinking about languages. And then I started noticing how often I heard or read things about languages. The only story from the Thursday edition of the NPR news program *All Things Considered* that I can remember is one about the Seneca language.

The language of the Seneca people is considered an "endangered language" because there are fewer than 50 fluent native speakers. Jamie Jacobs is one of those who is fluent. Jacobs' parents and grandparents didn't speak it, but his great-grandmother did and that was how he connected with her. The two generations that didn't learn the language didn't learn it, at least partly, because of the Indian boarding schools that Native American children were compelled to attend. There, students were abused and brutally punished for speaking their native languages.

Jamie Jacobs is young enough to have avoided being forced to attend an Indian boarding school and lucky enough to be able to study the language. And he was glad he did, because it was how he and his great-grandmother connected. Sometimes she would translate recordings of her father (Jamie's great-great-grandfather) singing in Seneca. Jamie

became deeply grateful for this gift. “That gave me a lot of deeper insight into the way that our ancestors understood the world,” he said.¹

Language has a power to both inform and express how we see the world. That’s one of the reasons using inclusive language is so important. When our language assumes maleness as normative, or whiteness as normative, it pushes us to view the world that assumes it is naturally male-led or white-led. The job title shifting from fireman to firefighter opens the job to people of all genders. When our language frames nature as dangerous, it becomes something to rule over and to tame. When our language frames nature as nurturing, it becomes something to enjoy and become a part of.

I ran into this again because I finished re-reading of the George Orwell classic novel *1984* this week. It was actually, in all likelihood, a first reading. I think I was in 8th grade when I was supposed to read it the first time, though I doubt I got all the way through. That would have been 1974 and I remember thinking that 1984 seemed like such a long time in the future.

Published in 1949, the book takes place in London, which has become just another city in Oceania, one of the three mega-nations that control almost all of the earth. (The parts they don’t control are the areas where they carry out their wars.) Oceania is a dystopian, totalitarian socialist state where everyone’s lives are controlled, even down to their thoughts. One of the primary ways this thought control is carried out is through a control and restriction of the language through the introduction of a new language, Newspeak.

In his appendix to the novel, George Orwell explains both *how* “Newspeak” works and *why* it was developed. It is the *why* that most caught my attention. “The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc [the totalitarian socialist ideology of Oceania], but to make all other modes of thought impossible.”² Language being used to control and form how one sees the world. I find it ironic that Orwell was almost certainly unaware of the racist and sexist assumptions within his novel, both being so baked into 1940s English language and culture.

All of this, of course, is related to our scripture lesson, the Pentecost story of Acts. Pentecost is actually a Jewish festival, the Festival of Weeks, or *Shavuot*, celebrated 50 days after Passover. It is a harvest festival described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The description of the festival in Deuteronomy is surprisingly (at me, at least) inclusive, an inclusivity that we will hear echoed in our reading from Acts: “Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name”

¹ Noelle E. C. Evans, “Seneca people are reviving their language, which boarding schools tried to erase,” *All Things Considered*, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/02/1102730375/seneca-people-are-reviving-their-language-which-boarding-schools-tried-to-erase> (aired 2 June 2022).

² George Orwell, *1984*, appendix, reprinted online at https://kickapooclark.weebly.com/uploads/5/0/8/5/5085586/the_principles_of_newspeak_orwell.pdf (accessed 4 June 2022).

(Deuteronomy 9:11). Over time, the festival came to also mark the giving of the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai.

That's why there are Jews from all over the Mediterranean world gathered in Jerusalem as our story from Acts unfolds. They are there for this inclusive, festive celebration. In fact, upon a closer examination of the text I realized that the *Shavuot* celebrations also appear to be the reason the disciples have gathered in Jerusalem.

Before, I had put the disciples all in one place because, as during the first days following Jesus' execution, they were afraid that they'd be next. Only the text says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place," implying that they had come together for the Pentecost (the *Shavuot*) celebrations. And while they are gathered in one place, the Holy Spirit shows up and they are overwhelmed by God.

"The scene is spectacular and chaotic," as one commentator describes it. "a violent, rushing sound like wind, and then 'divided tongues, as of fire' — not a fire that destroys, but rather like the fire that Moses encountered at the burning bush, which was 'blazing, yet it was not consumed.'"³

This commentary goes on: "The Spirit's immediate effect is linguistic: many are empowered 'to speak in other languages.'"⁴ The commotion gathers a crowd and, amazingly, each person hears what the disciples are saying in their native language. "Think of a meeting at the United Nations, in which each person hears (through a headset) the proceedings translated into his or her mother tongue. The upshot of all of this is a sense of togetherness and unity: diverse as they are, everyone understands and can communicate. Accordingly, they're dazzled and taken aback, asking, 'What does this mean?'"⁵

Peter gets up to tell them what it means. "He cites the prophet Joel, adapting those ancient words to illuminate the present: the final and decisive chapter of history has arrived, the dawn of God's joyous Jubilee that Jesus declared early in his ministry ..., and now the 'pouring out' of the Holy Spirit upon 'all flesh.' Jesus both heralded and inaugurated this new era, and the Spirit will now empower a community through whom the movement's message of healing, liberation, and joy will go out to the ends of the earth."⁶

The words Peter quotes are as inclusive as the instructions for the celebration of *Shavuot*: all ages and genders and statuses of freedom are blessed by the Spirit of God. That is what everyone understanding what these backwater Galileans are saying means.

Some see this story as a reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. You might remember that God humbles humanity in the Babel story by breaking down their ability to communicate, making them suddenly speak in all kinds of different languages. (It's worth going back and re-reading the story if it's been a while ... or if, like me with *1984*, you've never read it.) Except to really be a reversal of the Babel story, everyone would need to start talking one language. And that's not what happens in the story.

³ From SALT, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/6/3/beginning-again-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-pentecost> (accessed 1 June 2022).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

The understanding that happens in our Pentecost story is not achieved through sameness. “It’s not that everyone suddenly spoke Greek or Aramaic, and certainly not Latin, the language of empire! They kept their own tongues, and stories!”⁷ The diversity remains. In fact, the diversity of the Jesus movement expands as people from all around the Mediterranean world join it.

I think Luke (the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles) is describing in this story what the church is supposed to be. Luke is saying that the church is supposed to be “a diverse, prophetic community of bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers, male and female, slave and free.”⁸

And just maybe Luke is saying that the church can be, quite miraculously, a diverse, prophetic community of bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers, people of all genders and occupations and economic and social statuses – if we just let ourselves be overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit of God.

Amen.

⁷ James C. Howell, “Preaching on Pentecost,” *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/11365/preaching-on-pentecost> (posted 30 May 2022; accessed 2 June 2022).

⁸ SALT, *op. cit.*