

# VOICE, BREATH, SPIRIT

May 24, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman

First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Exodus 19:3-5, 16-19 and Acts 2:1-8, 12-18

---

## SCRIPTURE

---

Exodus 19:3-5, 16-19

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.”

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.

Acts 2:1-8, 12-18

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy

The Word of the Lord...

**Thanks be to God!**

---

## SERMON

---

I have something I would like to show you. Some of you may recognize it and know what it is. Some of you may guess at what it is because I posted a note on FaceBook, asking if anyone had one of these that I could borrow. This is what is known as a shofar. It is a horn that is used in Jewish religious ceremonies. A shofar is always made from the horn of some animal. The most common shofars are made from the horn of a ram, although there are exotic ones made from the horn of a kudu, an antelope found in East Africa.

There is a lot of symbolism connected with a shofar. First of all, there is a link to Abraham, the great ancestor of all the nations of Israel. You may recall that very strange story where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. The angel of the Lord stops Abraham and when he looks up he sees a ram, caught by its horn in a nearby thicket. Abraham offers the ram as the sacrifice in the place of Isaac. So the ram's horn is symbolic of God's provision and deliverance. Furthermore, whenever an animal with horns is mentioned in the Bible it is always symbolic of strength and power. Since a shofar is made from an animal's horn it represents power, of course, but more specifically because its shape is natural, and nothing made by human hands, it represents the power of God. To take it one step further, in some Jewish traditions the sound of the shofar represents the Voice of God.

I have been trying to make some sound on this particular shofar. It doesn't sound much like how I think the Voice of God sounds like, but listen to someone who knows how to do it:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUG7rRpFGvA>

Isn't that amazing? Now, because the shofar symbolizes the Voice of God, it is played on a number of occasions, but especially the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah, which is the Jewish New Year. The shofar is played because according to their traditions, the New Year commemorates God creating the universe. And in the first chapter of Genesis, how does God create and bring everything into existence? By speaking... God said, "Let there be light." God said, "Let there be waters under the sky..." God said, "Let there be lights in the sky..." Some have suggested that the idea is actually that God sung the universe into existence, that there is a musical element to all of creation.

But the first place that the shofar is mentioned in the Bible is not at creation and not even in the book of Genesis. It is in our Old Testament text for this morning from Exodus where in verse 16 it says, "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God." Then in verse 19 it says: "As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." Both of those references to trumpets are the word "shofar" in Hebrew, and it is interesting to note that the word here that is translated as "thunder" is literally "the voices" plural. The people of God are summoned by the blast of the shofar and God replies to Moses through the "voices."

So what is going on in this passage from Exodus and why are we reading it on this morning of all mornings? Well, let's take a look and see if we can figure it out. Our New Testament reading begins: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." When we hear the word "Pentecost" we think of this story of the followers of Jesus being empowered by the Holy Spirit. But obviously Pentecost meant something before this. It was and still is a Jewish holiday. The word "Pentecost" means the fiftieth day. It was celebrated on the fiftieth day after the highest of Jewish holidays, Passover. You may remember, fifty days ago, we celebrated Passover, with our Maundy Thursday service down in the Social Hall.

Passover commemorates the Israelite's freedom. They were slaves in Egypt and God sent Moses to deliver them with horrible plagues that built in intensity, until finally on the night of the Passover, Pharaoh had enough and told them to leave. So they packed up and took off. In Exodus 12:38, we find an interesting description of these freed slaves that left Egypt. It says that they were a "mixed crowd," literally a "tangled" crowd. In other words, while most of them were descendants of the sons of Jacob, they were of many families, clans and nations.

You know the next part of the story. Pharaoh changed his mind and came out with his army to bring them back. Then Charlton Heston parted the Red Sea so they could escape. They had this big party on the banks of the Red Sea, with singing and dancing and a DJ and a disco ball. Then it says that this tangled crowd wandered around in the wilderness. Guess for how long? Pentecost—fifty days.

Now when it says that they were in the wilderness, it means it was literally nowhere. It was a land that belonged to no one. No king or pharaoh claimed it. No king wanted it. It was not part of any country. It was just there. Out in the middle of this nowhere, they come to this mountain, and here we pick up our Old Testament lesson for this morning.

So here they are, this rag-tag bunch of freed slaves, under the jurisdiction of no king, with no land, no sense of identity, no idea what they should do next. What happens? They hear the Voice of God, or the voices of God, who comes to meet them on that mountain. God gives Moses the law, the commandments, and makes a covenant with this tangled crowd. He will be their God and they will be his people. They are no longer tangled up, no longer just a bunch of fugitive slaves. They are the nation of Israel.

So now we see the significance of the second chapter of Acts. These followers of Jesus had celebrated a Passover unlike anything they could have imagined, when everything fell apart with the arrest and crucifixion of their Master. They must have felt trapped like their ancestors by the Red Sea. But then God did something beyond their imagination. He made a way through the great barrier of death itself, when on the third day Jesus busted out of the tomb and rose again. It was amazing and their joy was beyond belief. But they did not know quite who they were or what they should do next, especially when Jesus was taken up to heaven. Then on the fiftieth day after Passover, they all gathered together. They were probably reading over this story from Exodus, when suddenly everything went crazy. Once again, it was the voice, or voices, of God. There was the sound of a violent wind, flames of fire, and voices, their own voices, praising God and speaking in various languages. Do you see how all this is fitting together?

So what happens next? Well, this was not some sort of mass hallucination, where they all merely thought they heard this great noise and saw the flames. It says that those in the neighborhood heard the same thing and came running to figure out what was going on. When they did they discovered a rag-tag bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, and probably a farmer or two from a backwater province called Galilee, all speaking fluently in a variety of languages. It was amazing and bewildering and no one could figure out just what was going on. It was too absurd for some. "These people have had one too many," some said. "They have been bending the elbow, hitting the bottle, and they are hammered, smashed, three sheets to the wind, drunk as a skunk."

And then Peter does something really weird. He stands up and starts to preach. He says, "We are all sober. It is too early in the day to be drinking. But something wild and crazy is going on. The Prophet Joel talked about this when he said that God was going to pour out his Spirit on everyone. Young and old, male and female, wise and foolish, rich and poor, are all going to be filled with the power of God. That is what is happening and we don't really have any control over any of this. You may think that we are all absolutely nuts. That doesn't really matter. What does matter is that you need to know about our Master, Jesus of Nazareth and what God has been doing through him." And just as that mixed up bunch of slaves on that first Pentecost became the nation of Israel, so that mixed up bunch of followers of Jesus were transformed into a new way of being God's Beloved Community. They became the Church of Jesus Christ and that transformation is still going on today.

So what are we to do with all this? Well, you have probably heard before that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, and so it is. But, it is more than just an anniversary, a date on a calendar. It is something like the shofar. It is a reminder that the Voice of God is still sounding out into this sad and sinful world. From the beginning of creation, God has been at work, speaking, singing, thundering, perhaps, the story of God's love, grace and mercy. Sometimes it rings out bright and clear. Sometimes it is more of a blat or a squawk. Sometimes it is much more subtle, almost down to a whisper. But it has never been silent. It is always there if we but listen. It continues to create and change and empower us, even when we are completely oblivious to what is going on around us. Pentecost is a time to stop and listen, to hear that Voice once again.

Tom Long, my old preaching professor once told this story about Pentecost. It happened when he was a young pastor right out of seminary, serving in a small southern congregation. He announced one week, "Next Sunday morning at ten o'clock, I'm going to start a pastor's church school class on the basics of the Christian faith. If you are new to the faith, or if you would like a refresher course in the faith, I invite you to join me next Sunday at ten."

So the next week, he went to his classroom expecting a nice crowd, and was immediately disappointed. There were only three elementary school children, three little girls, waiting for the class. To his credit, he didn't give up, but over the next few weeks did the best he could to teach them about the Christian faith. The week before Pentecost Sunday, he said to them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?"

They didn't. So, he said, "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world."

Two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but one of them got her eyes as big as saucers. And when she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!"

Dr. Long said that the beautiful thing is not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened. It was perfectly plausible to her that God's Spirit could have come even to their little congregation and that God's voice could still be heard even in their church on any given Sunday.

Pentecost is a reminder that anything is possible, even here at First Presbyterian Church in Marion, IA. The Spirit of God is still here among us. The Voice of God is still ringing out. It can get rather wild and crazy at times, and sometimes it can be absolutely terrifying. But the Spirit of the Living God is ready to fall upon us, if we are but willing. Then who knows what might happen. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.