

A Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost 2015  
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett  
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy MD

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

That must have been some sermon the disciples preached. I'm sure every preacher since then has wished she or he had a copy of it. I mean, sure, the mighty wind and all those tongues of flames must have helped get the message across. And it can't have hurt that this rag-tag band of uneducated fishermen and laborers and tax collectors were suddenly speaking in all the languages of the various people gathered there.

But the main thing, the amazing thing, is that whatever message all those 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 heard, three thousand in all, they were persuaded. Whatever the disciples preached to them, they not only understood the words, they believed the message, and there was, we are told, a one hundred percent conversion rate.

Now the Book of Acts goes on to relate what Peter's message to those gathered was; how Peter recalled to the assembly the life of Jesus and the prophecies relating to him, with a bit of accusation about their complicity in his death, and called on them to become followers of Jesus.

But I can't believe that Peter's words by themselves were the message that converted the three thousand. There's something missing there. There has to be, or else we could just keep saying what he said over and over and save the world.

But I think I know what the disciples said to the crowd, telling it in such a way that each hearer was able to understand and believe it. I think they told every man, woman and child gathered there, "God loves you."

That's really the Good News Jesus came to spread, and the one message that, when you come to believe it, has the power to convert, to transform, to resurrect you. God loves you.

I had a professor of preaching in seminary who said that that was the only sermon he ever preached any more. Sometimes it was "*God* loves you," sometimes it was "God *loves* you," and sometimes it was "God loves *you*," depending on the congregation, but that was the one message he felt the world needed to hear, and needed to hear over and over because we have such a hard time believing it.

And I don't know why we, individually, and collectively, have such a hard time believing those three simple words, but I know, both from my own experience and as a pastor, that it is true. Sometimes we doubt God, sometimes we doubt God's love, and sometimes we doubt that God could love us (or could love our neighbor), but the shifting doubt persists.

But God responds to that persistent doubt with an ongoing Pentecost. That strange phenomenon of the disciples speaking to each person in a way that they could understand

is what God is always doing. God is continually showing us love, and showing it in a way that speaks to our own temperament and circumstances.

If you don't believe me, ask your friends. Persuade someone who trusts you to tell you about their own experiences of hearing the voice of God. Chances are you will find the story surprising, even unbelievable. You'll think, "gosh, if that happened to me, I'd think I was going nuts." Or, "that's not the voice of God – God doesn't communicate like that."

But the fact is, God doesn't communicate like that to you, because that's not how you hear. God, like the disciples, speaks to each of us, loves each of us, in a way that we are able to hear, to receive that love.

Which is not to say that we always do hear God, or welcome God's love. We humans are a stubborn lot, and can make ourselves insensible to even very persuasive messages.

But lucky for us, and this may be the greatest sign of God's love, God is persistent. When we don't hear the news that God loves us, God keeps trying – speaking in other ways, through other messengers, using new words and new experiences – never giving up until we finally are ready to embrace the Good News that God loves us.

God does love you. God loves you enough to have gathered you together to live and learn and feast and mourn with one another. God loves me enough to have brought me here to be a part of this community for a while. God loves us enough to insist that we keep growing in love for God and one another, never resting in what we have been, however good it was. God loves us enough to call new people into our community, like the child

we baptize today, so that we and they can be renewed by telling and retelling the good news in new ways, with new voices, in new languages and stories.

God loves us enough to die for us – to lay down godly power and take on the image of humanity, even as God made us in the image of divinity, and to suffer and die at our hands, and then, instead of hating us, to swallow up our hatred in amazing, all-powerful love so that we can know and believe that God loves us, and love God in return.

Of course, John's Gospel says it best, and, who knows, this might just be the record of what the disciples actually said to that Pentecost assembly on that day so long ago. At any rate, it's far better than anything I could say on my own, so I'll give John the last word: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'"

Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!