

## “Whale Songs”

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Acts 2:1-13 + Acts 2:14-21 = tongues of Pentecost

**D**ouglas Adams, author of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has written a number of other books. One of my favorites is: *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. The main character is Dirk Gently, a sort of cosmic detective. And one day he was thinking about whales:



“In the past the whales had been able to sing to each other across whole oceans, even from one ocean to another because sound travels such huge distances underwater. But now, again because of the way in which sound travels, there is no part of the ocean that is not constantly jangling with the hubbub of ships' motors, through which it is now virtually impossible for the whales to hear each other's songs or messages. ... [Dirk] felt almost frantic at the idea of what the lives [of whales] must now be like.”

Ship's propellers and engine noise creating a human-made Babel for the whales. Just like the tower of Babel of old, where human hubris resulted in human languages being scrambled. The gift of languages at Pentecost is God overturning Babel ~ the reversing of Babel by God's dramatic intervention.

**U**p until the great day of Pentecost, Babel held full sway over all of us. Under the reign of Babel, we have to strain to hear God's message. Like with the whales, the Word is drowned out by all the interference. We cannot break through the din. Try as we might to adjust the signal-to-noise ratio, we simply cannot adjust our sets enough to catch God's message. Babel reigns right up to the day before Pentecost.





Suddenly, with the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, everything is transformed. We hear, now clearly and distinctly, the message of God unmixed with any racket. We “each hear in our own language” as Scripture records. Babel

reversed, the restoration of effective communication, order wrestled from chaos.

Everything changes ~ all by God’s hand. Suddenly these frightened disciples cowering in fear are transformed into excited, enthusiastic, boisterous communicators of God’s overpowering Word. Previously those who fled and denied, now they are trying to outshout each other in proclaiming Jesus crucified and risen. All because of the power-giving Holy Spirit coming into their heads and hearts, filling their souls, and each becomes a new person in Christ.

On Pentecost everything changes, yet just what this means for us today is a matter of wide interpretation.

I had a friend years ago, an anthropologist doing field research on rural Christian communities in Muslim Central Java. Almost every village congregation she visited would ask her rather skeptically right off, “What kind of Christian are you?” They were trying to figure if she was *their kind* of Christian.



She would start by answering, “Protestant.”

“No, no.” the elders of the congregation would respond, “what kind of Christian are you?”

“Well, I grew up Lutheran.” A confused expression would cross the elders’ faces. They would interrupt: “No. No. In worship do you raise your hands or not?”

“No, I don’t raise my hands.”

“Good, you are one of us. You are welcome in our community.”

So at that grassroots level, the brightline division does not divide Catholic from Protestant, nor Calvinist from Lutheran nor even

Fundamentalist from Progressive. For those village Christians in Java, and I think for us as well, the line of demarcation is not along denominational lines, but is simply that of more boisterous and spontaneous worship versus more liturgical and formal worship.

**T**his line also represents one between two interpretations of Pentecost. One puts the emphasis on “raising our hands” in worship, on miracles, on speaking in “*unknown* tongues,” shouts of “Amen,” prophesying and emotional testimonies of what God is doing.



Another interpretation puts the emphasis on the Holy Spirit inspiring those gathered to speak in “*known* tongues,” a more rational way to understand the event. Yet the Spirit does represent both the irrational side of God as much as the rational.



All present on that first Pentecost day would have borne testimony that the disciples were acting strangely. One cynic claimed they were drunk. These strange orators were indeed moved, enthusiastic, emotional, passionate. Most of us are familiar with churches which emphasize that side of the event and excel at a more emotional

approach to worship and ministry.

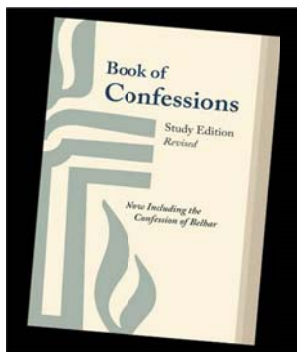
But the eyewitnesses that day would have borne equal testimony that these Spirit-inspired disciples were speaking in known languages and conveying rational testimony to God’s great acts in Jesus. Both are right, and both are at the same time incomplete. God calls us, mind and hearts, ration and emotion, soul and body.

**S**ome of us at GPC are more comfortable with the more emotional approach to the faith. Some others more comfortable in the rational. This certainly stems from our striving to be a broad theological, multi-racial and intercultural congregation. While those of us who are uncomfortable don’t raise our hands, we all do cultivate respect for each other’s worship practices so that there is no judgement nor denigration one to another.



You know the walls do not fall down when we raise our hands in worship. It's OK if you do. It's just fine if you don't. Whatever floats your boat.

It turns out the larger church is profoundly uncomfortable with the Spirit. Even a cursory look at the classic Affirmations of Faith shows little attention to the Holy Spirit. You would think in a Trinitarian document, all three, God, Jesus and Spirit would get equal time, but no. God the Creator gets some ink, Jesus gets a whole lot more, and the Spirit gets just a gloss, an honorable mention at most.



From our most confessional of denominations, the Presbyterians, if you in a moment of insanity did a word search for the word 'Pentecost' in the *Book of Confessions*, you come up with a big goose egg, absolutely nothing. Amazing: 9 Confessions, 3 Catechisms, and no mention at all of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire ~ not even an honorable mention.

Makes you think doesn't it? Pentecost would appear to be the theological step-child in our tradition. Maybe we have a blind spot. Maybe we can learn something from the more enthusiastic expressions of our faith. Maybe, just maybe, we would be better off to balance our intelligent approach with emotional intelligence as well.

For those of us most comfortable within the rational approach to the faith, Pentecost may appear like a return to Babel ~ the introduction of the tongues of angels, the language of God. But in actuality Pentecost is quite the opposite, the noise of Babel disappears. Its reign of confusion ends.



Pentecost is God's missional event, the Gospel moving out to every nation ~ 15 languages on the day of Pentecost becomes 70, and 70 becomes 700, and 700 becomes 7,000. Confusion is replaced with clarity ~ frustration transformed into comprehension. Noise dispersed. Babel reversed. Petrifying fear is transformed into passionate mission.

Dirk Gently, the cosmic detective we started out with, now worries more about us than the whales:

“But for a moment Dirk had a sense of infinite loss and sadness that somewhere amongst the frenzy of information noise that daily rattle[s our lives], he thought he might have heard a few notes that denoted the movements of [God].”



With Pentecost we get more than a glimpse of God. Beyond the din of noise inflicting our lives, beyond even the babble of languages, we get more than just a few notes denoting the movement of God. In the Pentecost event, we get the whole symphony.

