

“Speaking our Native Tongue”
Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Peter Shidemantle
The Day of Pentecost – June 12, 2011
Acts 2:1-21

You may be familiar with the 18th century Hindu fable about the motherless tiger cub who was adopted by goats and brought up by them to believe he was a goat. He spoke their language, ate their food, and in general believed he was a goat. One day a king tiger came along, and when all the goats scattered in fear, the young tiger was left alone to confront him – afraid, but somehow not afraid. The king tiger asked him what he thought he was doing, acting like a goat, but all the young tiger could do was bleat nervously and continue nibbling at the grass. So the tiger carried him to a pool to look at their reflections side by side. But this didn't have the effect he intended. Then the king tiger offered the young tiger his first piece of raw meat. At first he recoiled from unfamiliar taste of it. Then, as he ate more and more he felt it warm his blood, and the truth gradually became clear to him. Lashing his tail and digging his claws into the ground the young beast finally raised his head high, and the jungle trembled at the sound of his mighty, exultant roar.

This fable lifts up a truth about which virtually all the great religions of the world agree – that is, that human beings, as we generally exist in the world, are not what we were created to be. The goat is not really a goat at all. He is really a tiger, except he doesn't know it, and so for all practical purposes he isn't a tiger. In the language of our biblical faith, we were created in the image of God, but something has gone wrong. Like a mirror with a crack down the middle, the image we reflect back is badly distorted. According to the biblical story of creation, we were created to serve God and one another in love, but from the Garden of Eden on, we want to serve ourselves as gods instead – wrenching ourselves out of the kind of relationship with our Creator and with others that we were made for. We've lost paradise, but yet we carry paradise around inside of us in the form of

a longing, almost like a memory, or the dream of a blessedness that might someday be again.

But that isn't the end of it, of course. There's still enough tiger in us to make us uncomfortable with our goathood. It's not very difficult being a goat, actually. There's plenty of grass to eat, lots of support and encouragement, even if it doesn't quite fill us or satisfy us, to continue our pursuit of greener and greener pastures. This would be great if we were really goats. What good are all our "goatly" efforts – all the hard work, all our goals and dreams in life if they are undertaken and even achieved as creatures who are deluded and essentially out of place? If we were made for roaring, what good is it, what is it worth, if we bleat louder than the rest of the goats?

The longing, the faint memory, the dream of blessedness – however you might put it – might be inklings that are stirring inside us, but they are so easy to ignore in the rush and the busyness of our calendar-driven lives. We'd like to attend more seriously to these longings, that deeper hunger for true spiritual food that feeds and nourishes the image of God in us – but it's easier somehow to be content with just being good goats.

I see the story of the tiger and the goat as a Pentecost story, because Pentecost is about who we really are, who God intends us to be. Try as we might, we can't arrive at our true identity as images of God through our own efforts. We can't fix the crack down the middle of the mirror. Before he left his disciples and returned to God, the resurrected Christ promised that he wouldn't leave them as orphans. He would send another to be with us as Comforter, Advocate, one who empowers us to live into our God-given and God-intended identity. He knows there is an emptiness there, something that cannot be filled – not ultimately – by all the things we acquire, the honors we might pile up, the expertise we might gain. God sends the Spirit to remind us that we are made for roaring. The Holy Spirit is poured out by God to empower the church to advance Christ's mission to the ends

of the earth – to breathe life into our dry and brittle spirits and to set hearts that have grown accustomed to small loves aflame with passion and praise – to make us a people of forgiveness rather than vengeance, of mercy rather than retribution. The Holy Spirit empowers us, as a gathered community, to be more than we could ever be alone, empowers us to be one, one in the Spirit.

We need Pentecost; we need the God of Pentecost, who comes in the Spirit to set our hearts free from the safe spiritual boxes we choose for ourselves, to give us eyes to see in new ways, and a language to speak that seems foreign at first, but turns out to be our mother tongue – that language of faith and hope and love.

I've read that in medieval times, before the scriptures were accessible to ordinary Christians, people learned the stories of the Bible from the stained glass windows, the paintings, the murals and sculptures and icons, the pageantry of the Eucharist, and the painted domes of the great cathedrals. The cathedrals were also the center of community life, the courthouse of local lawmakers, a place where weary travelers could expect to find a meal and safe place to spend the night.

In those days the calendar that set out the church year that reflected the life of Christ did a lot more than determine which scripture passages were read on a given Sunday. It shaped the daily lives of the people. Festivals, saints days, holy days all lived and breathed in the world of the medieval church. Pentecost was one of the most unique and creatively celebrated days on the church's calendar. In 10th century Rome, for example, in order to make the coming of the Holy Spirit a dramatic and dynamic event for the congregation, services involved not just words and music but architecture. It was the custom to paint heavenly scenes on the domed ceilings of cathedrals. This wasn't just to inspire the faithful with blessed visions; it also disguised some discreet trap doors. During the Pentecost worship service, some servants would climb to the roof, and at the appropriate time during

the service, they would release doves through the holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds in the cathedral ceiling, swooping, diving symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit would descend on the people below.

At the same moment the choirboys would break into the whooshing and drumming sounds of a holy windstorm. Finally, as the doves were flying and the winds were rushing, bushels and bushels of red rose petals were showered through the holes down upon the congregation, like tongues of flame falling upon all who waited below in faith. They called these openings to the sky in medieval churches “Holy Spirit holes.”

We don’t build churches like that today. The great cathedrals of Europe are mostly museums now, and the “holy spirit holes” are probably sealed shut. Our Protestant forebears were rightly suspicious of the wealth and power the church had accumulated, and they did away with most of the pageantry and visible symbols of the faith. Today we are more likely to think of those times in terms of the “da Vinci Code” – the church concerned with maintaining its hold over people, amassing wealth and protecting less than heavenly secrets. We’re much more practically minded these days. Can you imagine the heat that must have escaped through those holes? Nevertheless, I like the story of when the German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine was once standing with a friend before the great cathedral of Amiens. The friend asked him, “Why can’t people build great buildings like this anymore”? Hein replied, “My dear friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions, and it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral.”

People in the church of Jesus Christ hold a lot of differing opinions on things. But if we think of those who have influenced us most in the faith – living or dead - even if we might flinch or chuckle at some of their opinions, it is their convictions that endure and remind us of the love of God that flowed through them, how their lives have opened us to the movement of God in our own. They are holy spirit holes for us – people whose hearts

were claimed by the awesome, glorious love of God.

On the Day of Pentecost they gathered, and upon hearing a sound coming from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and seeing tongues as of fire descend upon each, and people speaking in tongues apparently not their own, there was much confusion and bewilderment. Are these people drunk? Peter said no, but in a way they were, drunk with the mystery and joy of finally knowing who they were. Christ had come to offer his very body and blood for them, and at first they recoiled from it. His words and actions were strange and unfamiliar. They took offense and refused to accept him and accept themselves for who they truly were. They killed him, thinking they had seen the last of him, thinking they could hold God down to manageable size, thinking they could remain in control of their lives.

But this was out of their control entirely. We need Pentecost today. We need to come to know who we truly are, so we can let go of our nibbling, bleating selves, so we can be carried away with the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

To the glory of God, for the upbuilding of the church, for the sake of the world.
Amen.

