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# “All Heaven Breaking Loose”

A SERMON on Acts 2:1-21 for the Day of Pentecost, Year C,  
and the Commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Church Union  
forming The United Church of Canada

*Preached 8 June 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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I don't speak Italian. So I was—shall we say—*intrigued* when they told me I was being sent along with the Italian tour group.

The scene was Geneva, Switzerland, the first weekend in November back in 2017. As some of you know, I spent 7 weeks in Europe that fall during a sabbatical leave. Most of my destinations had some connection to the history of the Protestant Reformation, that collection of movements and moments, reformers and reforms, that—for better or worse—led to the separation of Western Christianity into the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant churches. Many people consider a particular action taken on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, by the German Catholic priest and monk named Martin Luther as the “spark” that ignited the embers of unrest into the full firestorm of the Reformation, and so the fall of 2017 marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Another major centre of the Reformation, where the streets had been walked by big names like John Calvin, John Knox, Guillaume Farrel, and Theodore de Beza, was Geneva, Switzerland. So, that first weekend in November, the federation of Swiss Protestant Churches was commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a nationwide youth-and-young-adult gathering there in Geneva. And my travel plans just happened to work out so that I could be there then, too.

Here's one of the things about Switzerland, though... If you ever thought things sometimes get complicated here in Canada because of bilingualism, having both English and French as official languages (at least federally), well, Switzerland has us beat by far. Switzerland has 4 national languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Now, only one-half-of-one-percent of people speak this last one, Romansh, so its status federally is different from the other three. But that still leaves the other 3 as co-equal official languages. So for a number of the activities during the festival weekend, one could sign up for a French option, a German option, an Italian option, or an English option. (After all, there were international visitors like me and, besides that, so many people in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe have at least some knowledge of English as a second language). I registered for an interactive walking tour of the Reformation history sites all around the city, and selected the English option. Alas, I was one of only 2 people who had done so (and, as it turns out, the other person was actually a German speaker who wanted to work on her English). So, when I arrived that Saturday morning at the meeting place, I was informed that we were being sent along with the Italian group. And off we went.

Here's how the next hour or so unfolded: We would arrive at a stop on the tour. Our tour guide would address the group and, working from a pre-written script, deliver all the information about the site to the group in Italian. Then, as we walked along to the next stop, she turned to the two of us who had registered for the English version and delivered the whole speech over again to us, in English. Pretty impressive, right? It gets better, though. That pre-written script she was working from...? It was *in French*! So—just to make this completely clear—this tour guide read from the piece of paper in her hand that was entirely in French, delivered all of the content in Italian, and then delivered it a second time in English, all without missing a beat. Oh, and... as we walked along the streets, we occasionally crossed paths with people she knew who she chatted with casually *in German*.

Impressed, amazed, astounded... I was all of those things. And admittedly a bit jealous, too. Now, she had a unique story as to how she'd gained such fluency: she'd grown up in the Italian-speaking section of Switzerland, with a father who was a Baptist minister from the United States and a mother from the German-speaking section, and then after high school she moved to Geneva, most prominent city of the French-speaking section, for university. But even knowing how her language abilities came to be, I was still quite impressed!

If I could be so amazed, even though there was a perfectly reasonable explanation, imagine how astounded the people are who we've heard about in this morning's scripture reading from the book of Acts. "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Neither the gathered crowds nor the disciples themselves could have imagined it. The first disciples—the Galileans who were speaking about God's deeds of power—were commoners, working-class labourers, from a specific region within the areas we now think of as Israel and Palestine. Indeed, as the people in the crowds ask, how *is* it that all these other people, gathered from all around different parts of the ancient Near East, are all able to hear them in their own languages?

Moreover, how is it that those disciples are able to speak? And I don't just mean, how is it that they are able to speak in other languages... I mean, what is it that empowers them to speak at all?

Let's remind ourselves of where we are in the story. These disciples begin following Jesus as he makes way through their region, healing and teaching and proclaiming news of a new "kingdom of heaven" about to break forth into the world. They follow him all the way to Jerusalem, where the powers that be of the time—religious, governmental, and economic alike—found such talk so threatening that they put Jesus to death. The disciples think that it is over. Maybe they've simply been following a foolhardy fantasy all this time. But then, on the third day, the tomb where Jesus had been laid is empty. God has raised him back to life, a vindication and validation of all that he'd been saying all along. They encounter Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, a number of times—on a road, at a meal table, by a lakeshore, in a locked room where they are hiding in fear. And finally, some 40 days later, he departs from them, being carried up into heaven.

Well, now what? What are they supposed to do? Shortly before he departs, Jesus tells them to wait there in Jerusalem, where he was going to send upon them what God had promised, "cloth[ing them] with power from on high."—whatever *that* meant!

And then... then it happens. Ten days later, a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Tongues as of fire. And words, lots of words, words that somehow are both *from* them and also from *beyond* them. Words that speak of God, of power, of victory over evil, of life, of hope. And, as we've heard, words that can be understood far beyond where they themselves know how to speak.

Or, to put it another way, all heaven is breaking loose, right before their eyes and ears.

Among those of us for whom English is our first language, most of us are familiar with the expression, "all hell broke loose." When our stable lives and well-ordered plans get interrupted by chaos and mess and unpredictability, we might say that "all hell broke loose." A few weeks ago at my apartment, when the crow who likes to hang out on our balcony railing decided to fly inside, and our dog was barking his head off as the bird flapped around and bounced off windows trying to find a way out, you could say that "all hell had broken loose."

But what about when our stable lives and well-ordered plans get interrupted by the chaos of goodness? By the mess of undeserved grace and mercy? By the unpredictability of unexpected joy and power? Well, perhaps that's God letting all heaven break loose in our midst.

For those disciples and crowds in our scene from Acts, all heaven is breaking loose as they come to understand in a new way how God's word from of old still speaks about them and to them and through them in the present. All heaven is breaking loose as they see the signs of the world Jesus talks about leaking through into the world where they find themselves. All heaven is breaking loose in their midst as somehow they are able to connect across boundaries of place and people, location and language.

This weekend, we are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of our particular way of being the Christian church in this place, The United Church of Canada. The experiment and wild hope that was inaugurated in 1925 has not always gone perfectly, by no means. We've gotten plenty of things wrong along the way, not the least of which being the evil we perpetrated as we colluded with the government and wider society of this land in the Indian Residential School endeavour. But there have also been plenty of places where a bit of heaven has broken loose among us, and continues to break loose among us. From the initial promptings of the Spirit that helped us realize that perhaps the different ways we understood and practiced Christianity as Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists were not so great that we couldn't faithfully be Christ's church together, to all the times where the Spirit moved us into glimpses of the openness, expansiveness, and inclusion that Peter heard speaking through the prophet Joel—"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."—to all the places still today where the Spirit is pushing us to be deeper, bolder, and more daring... heaven still breaks loose today, even without the fancy windstorm and fireworks of the original Pentecost we hear about in Acts.

A Presbyterian pastor down in North Carolina writes,

After the rushing wind and the fiery tongues, after the amazement of the crowds and the preaching of Peter, I read that the new converts shared their possessions in common and broke bread together. They listened and learned from one another. And they prayed for one another (Acts 2:37–47).

Every instance of people forming such communities makes me think that God exists in this weary, broken world. [...]

I don't have a pat answer to the questions of suffering, pain or loss. [But I do know] about the poet Charlotte Matthews and her "God Exists" list.

Instead of doctrine, dogma or any kind of argument, my friend Charlotte keeps a running tally of happenstances, hints and hopes that bring her welcomed comfort and surprising joy. Like once after the end of a terrible day she walked out of a convenience store lugging a microwavable supper and, for some reason, just happened to glance down. She saw a cheap plastic keychain that read *I Love You*. Charlotte tells me that she never takes off examples from the God Exists list. She only adds. And so here's a story [this pastor says] from my life:

On Wednesday I attended my oldest son's kindergarten graduation. This is a thing now. Boys and girls marched dutifully to the front of a sweltering multipurpose room stuffed with parents, grandparents and younger siblings. The grads sang what sounded to me like vaguely patriotic nursery rhymes

accompanied by a recording. This was fine, I guess, but nothing evoking the Divine. Until there was a musical interlude on the soundtrack. Then 150 kindergarteners simultaneously busted into air guitar solos! Oh yes, there were many squinting, snarling rock-and-roll faces! There was unity to the joyful chaos, a common force in each person's unique, individual expression, and I was caught up in it. Afterward I realized that it was a Pentecostal moment. [...]

[W]hat if we have it all backwards about miracles? What if, by miracle, we should not think of the extraordinary, the rare or the impossible but actually the ordinary, the daily and the momentous in the moment? What if miracles of the Spirit are everywhere just as surely as your air guitar is always in tune?

After the air guitar solos, students and families filed back into the classrooms for an after party. The pomp of ceremony was replaced with cake, cookies and candy. That sugar hit the graduates' bloodstreams like electrified power chords, and we adults were trying to pull our kids down from the ceilings in order to pose for pictures. But by some chance there was a lull and I just happened to be there watching as a recent grad, his clip-on tie askew, pilfered his *abuela's* iPhone. Grinning to beat the band, he wrapped one arm in a side hug around a giggling classmate with blond pigtails and, with the other arm, stretched the phone out for a selfie of the two of them.<sup>1</sup>

Now, my friends, don't you think that speaks a word of wild hope that can be understood in any language?

*Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Taylor-Troutman, "Pentecost and building a 'God Exists' list", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 8 June 2019, rev. 6 June 2025, <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/06/pentecost-and-building-a-god-exists-list/>