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Study guide

A season of listening

Pentecost is a time to hear diverse voices

By Robert C. Blezard

Lutherans across the globe can look with honor and pride at our German roots, as well as how our faith practices and beliefs developed along with other European/Western theological traditions. But, just as the earliest followers of Jesus heard and understood people from other lands speaking about their faith on Pentecost day, now is the time for the world's Lutherans to hear and understand the perspectives of all our siblings, especially those who are not of European descent and those who have new ideas. This may challenge us, but it might also open ways for the Spirit to work more intensely in our midst.

EXERCISE 1: PENTECOST LISTENING

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit fell upon Jesus' followers and opened their ears to one another. Although they were speaking different languages, each heard in their own native language. Read the story of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-13 and then discuss:

- What nationalities comprised the group of Jesus followers who gathered on the day of Pentecost? (For a deep dive, research a little about each culture.)
- What happened when the Spirit arrived?
- Why do think it was a priority for the Spirit to bring these early Jesus followers together by uniting them in language?
- If the Spirit had not united them by giving them the understanding of language, what would they have had to do to become "one" group? Explain the difficulties that would have arisen if they had to rely on human translators.
- Turning to your own experience, how might listening to other people as if they were speaking in your language affect how you receive and value their opinions?
- What can we learn by seeking out, hearing and listening to people from different cultural backgrounds?

EXERCISE 2: THE "DRUNKEN MONK"

Arguably the most important theologian in the development of modern Christianity, Martin Luther was born, lived and died far away from Rome, which was in his day the center of Christian thought and power. Moreover, his native German language wasn't used in theological and academic circles. Luther's nationality, language and culture made it easy for "established" theologians initially to dismiss him (Pope Leo X reportedly ridiculed him as a "drunken monk"). But the power and clarity of Luther's writings eventually prevailed and changed the world. Discuss:



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- In the first chapter of John's Gospel, Philip finds Nathanael and tells him he found the messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael responds, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). How is this similar to the initial response of Rome to Luther?
- What was it that enabled Luther to break through the indifference and scorn of established theological and academic gatekeepers? Explain why it is often the case that for outsiders to be heard and recognized they must be especially brilliant or talented?
- Consider that it took until 1970 for Lutherans in the United States to ordain women; 1981 for a president to appoint the first female Supreme Court justice; 2008 for Americans to elect a Black president; and 2021 before the Senate confirmed its first transgender candidate to federal office. Why is it so hard for "outsiders" to be taken seriously in established fields of endeavor and to gain acceptance?
- Reflect on the human tendency to listen first to opinions that are similar to ones we've already formed, to voices that are most like our own, and to think of solutions to problems in frameworks that are established. How have you seen this at work in your own life and circles?
- How might today's religious landscape be different if Luther had not arisen as a theologian and reformer?
- Just for pure speculation, how many other brilliant, prophetic voices might have changed the world for the better if they had only been able to be heard and listened to?
- How can we do better as people of faith to hear and listen to other voices?

EXERCISE 3: WHITE DENOMINATION

Since its founding in 1988 our denomination has endeavored to diversify our membership to reflect the population of North America as a whole. Yet despite goals, speech and programs, the ELCA has persistently remained overwhelmingly white, with some 96% of membership of European descent. Increasingly, church leaders are viewing this as a deficiency.

- Why do you think the ELCA has remained overwhelmingly white despite all its efforts to move the needle?
- How does inherited, historical culture shape a church? What are the benefits? What are the drawbacks? How can it sometimes be a difficult limitation to overcome?
- Statistically, the ELCA is 96% white. How do the demographics of your congregation compare? How would you compare the similarity or difference?
- How might our denomination benefit from seeking out, listening to, and incorporating the voices and viewpoints of thinkers and faithful people who are not European and not white? How can that be accomplished?
- Who are the non-European and non-white voices and thinkers in your congregation? In your community? How does your congregation cultivate and listen to their viewpoints? How can your congregation do a better job?

Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Reflect on the human tendency to listen, first and primarily, to opinions and ideas that are similar to ones we've already formed, to voices that are most like our own, and to think of solutions to problems in frameworks that are established. How have you seen this at work in your life and circles? How has this been a problem? What is gained by opening our ears and minds to new ideas?
- Lutheranism arose from and has thrived in European soil. How has this been a strength? How might this have been a liability as Lutheranism spread across the world? How might Lutheranism be enriched by seeking out, hearing and listening to the voices, ideas and perspectives of people who are neither European nor of European descent?
- Do you believe that all people are created in the image of God? That we are equally children of God, loved by God and saved by God? If so, would it not follow that people of all races, languages, nations and religions have ideas and viewpoints that are worthy of being listened to? How can people of faith be sure to listen with faith and care to all people?
- On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit gave the earliest church the ability to understand one another across language barriers. Why do you think God did that? What was achieved? Given modern technology and communications, do we have that ability today? What would be gained if we leaned into a season of "Pentecost" listening?



A SEASON OF LISTENING

By Carmelo Santos

PENTECOST IS A TIME TO HEAR DIVERSE VOICES

8 MAY 2021

Luke writes in Acts 2 that on Pentecost, God sent the Spirit on Jesus' followers and they spoke in different tongues about the wonders of God. Some people listened and were amazed; others sneered and accused them of being drunk.

But Peter explained that the prophecy was being fulfilled:

***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
PROPHECY, 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 PROPHECY (ACTS 2:17-18).***

Children, youth, older adults and slaves are all bearers of God's visions and dreams—prophets of God's future. Can we listen to God where God chooses to speak rather than where we think God should?

Those who sneered were confused, not only by Galileans speaking foreign tongues but also by their having anything meaningful to say. Remember Nathanael's question: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth [in Galilee]?" (John 1:46).

THE SPIRIT OF GOD HAS NOT CEASED TO BLOW. GOD CONTINUES TO SPEAK—NOT WHERE WE THINK GOD SHOULD BUT WHERE GOD CHOOSES.

For generations Lutherans have been trained to listen to Europe as a sort of primal source of good theology and to European and European descent culture (even within the United States) as the standard for what is Lutheran.

For instance, getting a doctorate in Lutheran theology requires learning German and knowing writings by European and European descent theologians, but Latinx, Native, African descent and Asian Lutheran theologians are optional (as are feminist and LGBTQIA+ theologies). In fact, theologies that aren't Eurocentric are

often viewed with suspicion and sneered at as a watering down of real Lutheran identity: "Aren't these from Galilee?"

Yet the Spirit blows where it chooses (John 3:8). The story of Lutheranism began with the Spirit stirring a young monk to dare speak a new word—a word about the wonders of God's grace and a word in the vernacular of his people, with their peculiar accents, idioms and idiosyncrasies. Many joined. Others sneered, "Aren't these from Galilee?" The first Lutherans, too, were accused of watering down the tradition.

IF WE LISTEN CAREFULLY, WE, TOO, WILL BE AMAZED THAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY AND BE TRANSFORMED BY IT.

The Spirit of God has not ceased to blow. God continues to speak—not where we think God should but where God chooses. It is still Pentecost! Many have received tongues of fire and have a new word for the church and the world—a word of the wonders of God, of the liberating and healing power of grace, and a word of challenge for the church to dare risk it all and follow Christ into the places of great pain, to pour ourselves out as a healing balm on the wounds of our society and the planet.

Lent is a season of fasting, and Advent is one of waiting. Pentecost should be a season of listening. Let's listen with open hearts to the theologies, liturgies, practices, testimonies and music of different cultures, groups and traditions—including people with different disabilities—through which the Spirit is speaking.

If we listen carefully, we, too, will be amazed that we can understand what they have to say and be transformed by it. How can we hear them in our own language (Acts 2:8)?

And for those from minoritized groups, let us boldly proclaim what the Spirit is giving us. This Pentecost, let us listen to the voices within our own culture and traditions and be surprised by what the Spirit is doing among us—giving us dreams, visions and prophecies for the healing of our society and planet, and for the upbuilding of our beloved church. †

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