

“Arrival”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

6-4-17 Pentecost Sunday

Based upon Acts 2:1-12; Ephesians 4:17-24

In last year’s hit movie *Arrival*,¹ an alien species suddenly arrives on earth and positions its huge, oblong ships all around the globe. The ships hover over the earth but otherwise do nothing else. For obvious reasons, this makes the military uneasy, so they hire a linguist named Louise, played by Amy Adams, to do the almost-impossible task of making first contact with the aliens, whom they call Heptapods because they look like giant seven-legged octopuses. Her assignment is to meet them, learn how to communicate with them, and then find out as quickly as possible what business they have on earth. It takes Louise less than five minutes to determine that verbal communication won’t work with the Heptapods because humans cannot make the sounds that they make. So Louise has to teach the Heptapods English, while at the same time learning their written language, which is drastically different from any known language on earth. Like Chinese, Heptapod language is composed of “logograms,” or symbols which convey multiple words at a time, rather than consisting of letters used to make up individual words. The logograms look like circles which have been drawn by a 21st-century child trying to figure out how to use a defective quill pen. [Slide]

As Louise tries to decipher how the splotches on each inky circle differ from one another, she learns that one of the reasons the Heptapods write in circles is that they do not share humanity’s linear view of time. Just as they can begin writing a sentence at any point on the circle, they can see past, present, and future at all times. In fact, it is because they can see the future that they are visiting Earth in the present, to give humanity a gift that will benefit both human beings and Heptapods in the future. The more time Louise spends trying to understand this gift, the more her understanding of time and the future start to shift too. I won’t give away all of the details of the movie if you haven’t yet seen it because it is excellent and suspenseful, but suffice it to say that it is this shift in Louise’s perception which is critical to how the story unfolds. It is also this shift which has lead critics to argue that the movie is less about aliens and space ships and more about the impact which language has on the way we see ourselves and the world.

In linguistic terms, the idea that language can influence not just our communication style but also the way we see and think about the world is called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.² In 1929, after studying the languages of isolated tribes in both North and South America, Edward Sapir hypothesized that the language we speak can affect how we see the world, a theory called linguistic relativity. His partner, Benjamin Whorf, then took that hypothesis one step further and questioned whether language may even limit in a deterministic way how we see reality, a theory called linguistic determinism. The classic example of the former is that Eskimos see snow

¹ *Arrival*. The movie. Directed by Denis Villeneuve. Los Angeles: Paramount, 2016. (Starring Amy Adam, Jeremy Renner and Forest Whitaker).

² See e.g. Martinelli, Marissa, “How Realistic Is the Way Amy Adam’s Character Hacks the Alien Language in *Arrival*? We Asked a Linguist”. Blog. Browbeat- Slate.com, posted Nov. 22, 2016, retrieved May 23, 2017 from http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2016/11/22/a_linguist_on_arrival_s_alien_language.html; Panko, Ben, “Does the Linguistic Theory at the Center of the Film ‘Arrival’ Have Any Merit?”, ASKSmithsonian, posted Dec. 2, 2016, retrieved May 23, 2017 from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/does-century-old-linguistic-hypothesis-center-film-arrival-have-any-merit-180961284>.

differently from the rest of the world because they have so many words for it. The classic example of the latter that Whorf proposed, was that the Hopi Indians were limited in their understanding of time because their language was limited in its words for time.

The movie takes Whorf's theory of linguistic determinism, which has since been refuted by many linguists, to an extreme that even Whorf never anticipated because in the end, it is a Hollywood movie, not a linguistics documentary. But like the movie *Contact*, which has dozens of sermon illustrations in it because it is more about faith than aliens, I believe the movie *Arrival* has much to teach us about faith too, if we take it as a parable, not a scientific linguistics lesson.

The story of the first Pentecost begins with a very similar plot, after all. It begins with the arrival of the Holy Spirit, whose presence is both wondrous and unsettling to those who are there at the time. Then, after the Spirit makes contact with the disciples, enabling them to learn the language of the Spirit, both their communication style and their view of the world are forever changed. The disciples go from being a bunch of well-intentioned, but mostly uneducated fishermen and peasants from Galilee, to being effective and articulate ambassadors of Christ to the world. Once they acquire the language of the Spirit, they are truly transformed, not just for the miraculous moment when they can speak the foreign languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem, but for the rest of their lives as well. They are able to craft persuasive sermons, heal the sick, challenge the authorities, and survive great suffering in ways that they never could have before Pentecost, and probably never dreamed of doing. So in much the same way that the movie invites its audience to consider how they see the future, in light of the gift which was Louise's language lessons about time, the Pentecost story invites us to consider how we see the world, in light of the gift which is the Spirit's language lessons about the Gospel.

Before we can do this, however, we first have to consider what the language of the Spirit is and whether we know it at all. As I have mentioned on other Pentecost Sundays, spiritual language lessons are no longer a high priority in our culture. Fewer and fewer people read the Bible or know its stories, and if you don't know much about Christ or his teachings, then language of the Spirit is as unintelligible as Navajo was to German spies during World War II, because the Spirit communicates the teachings of Christ. That is what our theological logogram on the bulletin cover conveys. The Holy Spirit is one with God the Father and the Son. So the Spirit cannot contradict Christ's will or way. Add to the problem of biblical illiteracy the fact that the Spirit typically communicates Christ's teachings using a language which more often conveyed indirectly through nudges and whispers, signs and dreams, warmed hearts and upset stomachs than directly, and you end up with a language that even people of faith can struggle to comprehend at times. As a result, some Christians believe the language of the Spirit is conveyed through speaking in tongues and others do not, and some Christians believe the essence of the Spirit's message is about heaven and hell, while others do not. In the movie, humans have the same problem with the Heptapod language. Louise thinks they have come to present "a gift." Others think they have come to reveal "a weapon." Translation can be tricky business, and only God knows if we are doing it right.

I cannot guarantee that we are translating correctly. But I can at least tell you what, according to our Reformed Tradition, we believe the Spirit is trying to say. First, the Gospel is meant to be a gift, never a weapon. If it is used as a weapon, that is not God's doing. Second, the message of the Gospel is about the pervasiveness of God's grace, the steadfast nature of God's love, the power of God's forgiveness, and the parameters of God's kingdom on Earth. It has taken us some time to realize this. We went through a heaven and hell phase in history and a phase of focusing more on naming sins than embracing sinners. But in the past century, the Spirit has spoken loud and clear to us first and foremost about love and grace, justice and peace. The Spirit has called us, as the Spirit called the first disciples, to embody and proclaim God's love for all people, and God's command to turn away from our ways of greed and selfishness toward the generous and serving ways of Christ.

What would happen, do you suppose, if we allowed this language to sink into our psyches so deeply that it rewired our brains in much the same way the Heptapod language rewired Louise's brain? If this were a movie, then I suspect we would soon find ourselves performing the same miracles the first disciples were able to perform. But even if we cannot learn the Word well enough to work miracles, we can change our lives and our world by striving to become fluent in the language of the Spirit, and we should because even if Whorf was wrong about language limiting our world view, the idea that our language affects how we see the world is still correct.

In his book, Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages, linguist Guy Deutscher explains this beautifully by noting two profound ways that language changes how we think.³ The first way is by setting our expectations. For example, when we say that someone is a "male nurse," we are saying implicitly that nurses are usually female, so a "male" person is an exception to the rule. That makes it harder to convey to boys that nursing is a great profession for both men and women. But when we change a term, like switching from fireman to firefighter or stewardess to flight attendant, the language gives permission for both boys and girls to dream. This is why the whole debate about political correctness is grounded in false assumptions. The point in being aware of our language is not to enslave people to observe a forced kind of politeness, it is to recognize when language has become inaccurate and unhelpful because of its implicit limitations. In the language of the Spirit, however, all people are "children of God" and "gifted by God." Imagine how we would see ourselves and others if we really allowed the Spirit's word choice to rewire our brains?

The other way that language changes how we think, according to Deutscher, is by its grammar. This is called the Boas-Jacobsen principle. For example, in English, we can say "I spent last evening with my neighbor," without revealing whether that neighbor was male or female. So in English, if I wanted to keep that information private I could. But in German, Russian, and French, you would have to reveal the gender of the neighbor whether you wanted to or not, because they have one word which means male neighbor and one that means female. A

³ Deutscher, Guy. Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages. Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

person in these countries could lie of course, if they really wanted to keep the information secret, by intentionally choose the wrong word. But the point, as Deutscher puts it, is that in those countries, “they expect certain information because of their language, and are used to paying attention to certain details because of their language. When a language forces its speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world each time they open their mouths or prick up their ears, such habits of speech can eventually settle into habits of mind with consequences for memory, or perception, or associations, or even practical skills.”⁴

This is not really a new idea. The Talmud, which is the central text of rabbinic Judaism because it contains all the commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures, seems to recognize this point when it says, “There are four tongues worthy of the world’s use. Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for lamentation, and Hebrew for ordinary speech.”⁵ The ancient rabbinic scholars who observed this recognized that certain languages lend themselves both to communicating ideas in a particular way, and to promoting those ideas. Paul, or a disciple who wrote in his name, recognized this too. But after Pentecost, instead of recommending one of these four languages as the language of the Christian faith, he said in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, “Let the Spirit change your way of thinking” (Eph. 4:23 CEV).

If we set out to become fluent in the language of the Gospel, if we made it a priority to discern what the Spirit was trying to communicate with us as if the fate of the world depended upon it, (because it does), there is no question in my mind that our thinking about each other and the world would change too. It would have to change because the Spirit’s language is communal more than it is individualistic, and requires a grammar of love not hate, mercy not judgment, and justice for all not just for some. The language of the Spirit predisposes us to look for grace and share grace before anything else. So even if we couldn’t heal each other miraculously, we could change our world for the better simply by shifting our expectations and attention. We don’t need the Spirit to dance like tongues of fire on our heads to have another Pentecost. We just need to listen and learn.

I’d like to close today with a video which has been around for a while but depicts beautifully how God’s Spirit can help us see and think about the world differently. In the video the message is conveyed with glasses, as opposed to head phones, so it is an imperfect metaphor for the language lessons I’ve been talking about. But if you think of the African American man who presents a pair of glasses in the video as the Spirit, then you’ll get the idea. **[Video shown]**⁶

⁴ *Ibid*, 152.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

⁶ “*The Secret to Happiness is Service*”. Video. Fellowship Bible Church. 2005. Posted by ChristLambOfGod, April 3, 2011, retrieved May 24, 2017 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxZR4HhIDu4>.