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First Presbyterian Church of Greenville, MS

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Title: *Culture Shock*

Text: Psalm 104: 24-34; Acts 2:1-21

**Psalm 104:24-34, *The Message***

What a wildly wonderful world, GOD!  
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side,  
made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.

Oh, look—the deep, wide sea,  
brimming with fish past counting,  
sardines and sharks and salmon.

Ships plow those waters,  
and Leviathan, your pet dragon, romps in them.

All the creatures look expectantly to you  
to give them their meals on time.

You come, and they gather around;  
you open your hand and they eat from it.

If you turned your back,  
they'd die in a minute—

Take back your Spirit and they die,  
revert to original mud;

Send out your Spirit and they spring to life—  
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

The glory of GOD—let it last forever!

Let GOD enjoy his creation!

He takes one look at earth and triggers an earthquake,  
points a finger at the mountains, and volcanoes erupt.

Oh, let me sing to GOD all my life long,

sing hymns to my God as long as I live!  
Oh, let my song please him;  
I'm so pleased to be singing to GOD.  
But clear the ground of sinners—  
no more godless men and women!

O my soul, bless GOD!

### **Acts 2:1-21**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “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.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’ clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘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 prophesy, 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 prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

When the Hayes Family moved to Greenville almost 3 years ago now, I think I heard people say – more than anything else – “Wow, so you're family moved from California to the Mississippi Delta. It must be culture shock for you!”

I remember being in Stareka Grocery, one day, not long after we moved here and someone said: “You moved here from where?! California?! ...What in the world are you doing in Greenville, MS?!”

I was ordering McDonald's at the drive-in with the family on the way to Cleveland... and when I picked up our food... the cashier said: “You're not from around here are you?” And I said: “I didn't grow up here, but I live here now... How did you know?” She was playful... and started teasing me in a funny way: “It's how you LOOK! It's how you TALK.” We had a good laugh about it. Kim and I had to smile!

Culture shock.

We have all experienced it in one way or another. It does not matter if you have lived in the same town your whole life. It does not matter if a person never traveled outside of a 5 mile radius from their home... they STILL experience culture shock.

When Kim and I were preparing to move to Greenville – people in the Bay Area and Greenville said: “Now, you know it's going to be culture shock. I remember asking Kim: “Are you okay with this?” Kim was pregnant with Sonja at the time and, it was funny, she said: “Honey! – I think this pregnancy has been culture shock!”

I once heard some words of wisdom that expanded my awareness of “culture” and “culture shock” at a panel discussion that I was on with two rabbis and a priest (no, I’m not kidding)... and the panel discussion was addressing interfaith couples seeking marriage. Rabbi Familant said: “Every marriage is cross-cultural. You can have two people who grew up in the same town... on the same block... and still have VASTLY different cultures present.” Those are the things that you figure out in marriage... and I’m not just talking about how to make coffee... or how you fold laundry. In marriage, you learn how to make decisions together... you learn how to support each other... pursuing mutual goals for family and community. A few of the mutual goals and priorities of The Hayes Family are: passion, love, kindness, forgiveness, peace and justice...

I think it took me about a year living in Greenville to realize: residents of Greenville have experienced substantial culture shock because of how this community has *changed* over the years. All the things that people remember... and talk about... become part of the sacred narrative of the community.

Some of the negative change I have heard talked about include: the declining tow boat industry, perhaps beginning with Jimmy Carter and the Grain Embargo, the Greenville Air Base... and industry after industry... one by one... leaving Greenville...

The population... and culture... of Greenville have changed drastically... over the past several years, from what I’ve heard. You know this much better than I do.

I have heard some say: “I wish you could have seen the way Greenville used to be. It used to be such a beautiful place.” Well – I am here to tell you: Greenville still is a beautiful place!

Culture shock... How have *you* experienced it over the years as a resident of Greenville? How have *you* experienced culture shock in other places you have lived... or visited... and what did it teach you about how you *choose to live* your life?

Imagine the culture shock when gathered together on that first day of Pentecost there were 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. I wonder what it sounded like

that day to hear all of these people speaking in their own languages about God's deeds of power?

Some of the people asked a question, which I think is a good one for a person in any kind of cross-cultural learning experience. They asked: "*What does this mean?*" The learning from a situation like this stops when a person simply turns around... and avoids a cross-cultural experience just because it is uncomfortable. It's better to ask a question like: "What does this mean?" or other questions which will help you observe another culture... to learn from it... and apply some aspects to your life.

My younger brother, Jonathan, was in the Peace Corps for 2-years in the Republic of Georgia. He used to advise new recruits for the Peace Corps... saying: "What you need to *do* to succeed in this particular kind of cross-cultural work is: Find an aspect of the culture that resonates with you... find one first... then a few aspects. Connect with those shared interests and you will get something out of your experience in the Peace Corps." The advice is so simple, but so true! I think my brother's advice was like those on that first day of Pentecost... who were seeking to learn from their cross-cultural experience by asking: "*What does this mean?*" They did not shut-down from the situation... and leave... or make fun of those who were "speaking in tongues."

There were some that day who said: "These people are drunk!" These folks are like those who might mock the process of cross-cultural learning because it seems different... or outside the box... outside the norm.

Cross-cultural learning can be funny. This reminds me of something that – again – my brother Jonathan told me about a visit to Bulgaria. His wife, Sophia, was born and raised in Bulgaria, which is where they were married about two years ago. He was having lunch at a restaurant and he asked for some water. The waiter shook his head "No!" he thought as the waiter was kept shaking his head back and forth. It turns out that shaking your head back and forth in Bulgarian actually means "Yes!" Here Jonathan thought the waiter was refusing to give him some water... but in actuality the waiter was saying "Yes" in Bulgarian!

Cross-cultural learning can be funny. Yes. But do not let the humor keep you from connecting... from seriously engaging... and learning about another person's culture and experience.

In the scripture, Peter quickly shuts down the idea that “These people are drunk!” He says... “(People) of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk... No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘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 prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...’”

First Presbyterian Church, our church family, has a wonderful and prophetic ministry that our world, and Greenville, so desperately need! When I interviewed with the pastoral search committee over 3 years ago, I felt... and discerned... a “cultural kinship” with this congregation. Is that possible? Is it possible this Midwestern born, Yankee (can I say that from the pulpit?) from California has a “cultural kinship” with this congregation in the Mississippi Delta? I believe so, and I feel it more every day!

We are a congregation strong in our Presbyterian Heritage and I love that! We value education. We believe in putting our faith into action through mission. So many of our members are out in the community doing extraordinary things... I was at a Washington County Leaders event this week and there were 3 Presbyterians out there... in an active role... to make this community and even better place... You have inspired me... and I continue to grow in my journey of faith because of who you are. I’ll tell you one thing that stuck out to me in the search process. In the Church’s mission statement, I noticed the line: “We are friends with one another.” I am convinced that we cannot underestimate the power of friendship in the church. Friendship is one of life’s greatest joys. We enjoy being with one another. Believe it or not, there are some institutions and churches who have the same vision... and share the beliefs... and do not enjoy being together. It’s interesting when it comes to friendship: Some of my BEST friends are completely different from me theologically, or politically, but it doesn’t get in the way of our friendship. What a gift from God: FRIENDSHIP! It’s hard to predict what will turn out to be a true friendship. I do not want to sound to Disney here, but I think friendship is magical!

Our church... and the Mississippi Delta... the experience of community here is unlike anything anyone could experience anywhere else in the world! We have something that is uniquely our own, which God has blessed us with... *and part of that blessing includes experiences of “culture shock...”*

It has been my experience... that culture shock is often framed negatively, but I do not think it should be. Think of it this way... if it weren't for the culture shock experience of Pentecost, the church would not be in existence today.

There is no one here today who has not experienced some kind of culture shock... and we will continue to experience culture shock...

As Christians, we cannot hide... or shut ourselves off... from culture shock experiences. To do this would be to go against our very Christian calling. It would dishonor the culture of the early church... which facilitated cross-cultural worship and ministry. To ignore cross-cultural learning experiences sucks the life out of Pentecost.

Let's take a page from the early Christians who desired to learn from their experience, asking: "What does this mean?" What does this wild, wacky... perhaps on the edge of chaos experience... say about God... and the faith of God's people? What does the experience of Pentecost filled with people speaking in tongues... what appeared to be a violent wind... and a fire among the people... what does this say about God's character... and the calling of Christ's church?" *"What does this mean?"*

When we learn from our cross-cultural experiences... the Pentecost experiences of our own time... not only will we grow our faith, but I believe we will also discover mutual goals and interests with people we would never have imagined possible... and we will accomplish things that we once thought were insurmountable!

Then... we will share the joy of the Psalmist who said:

"What a wildly wonderful world, God!

If (we) turned our back on you,  
we'd die in a minute—  
we'd revert to original mud;

Send out your Spirit and we spring to life—  
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

The glory of GOD—let it last forever!  
Let GOD enjoy his creation!

Oh, let me sing to GOD all my life long,  
sing hymns to my God as long as I live!  
Oh, let my song please him;  
I'm so pleased to be singing to GOD.

O my soul, bless GOD!" (*The Message*)

*I pray all this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*