

Reflections on Pentecost

^{NRS} **Genesis 11:1** Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.⁶ And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

^{NRS} **Acts 2:1** When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² 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.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

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Pentecost is one of those events that come around each year on the church calendar. Like Easter and Christmas, it's too important to ignore, but because it comes around every year, at some point, we can feel like it's a well-worn story and there's little to be said that hasn't been said over and over before. The passages of scripture suggested for today pairs up the story of the tower of Babel with the story of the Holy Spirit filling the early followers of Christ on Pentecost morning. Both events have the power of communication as an important element of their narrative.

The building of the tower of Babel takes place on the plain of Shinar, another name for Babylon. It has often been assumed that the tower was built in multiple levels, each a bit smaller than the level beneath it, in a style that is called a ziggurat. Towers such as this were found in many Mesopotamian cities. Years later, when the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon they saw these ziggurat towers - and in them they saw Babylon's attempt to claim for itself power that belonged only to God. The prophet Isaiah said that the attitude of the Babylonians was, "I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High." And then Isaiah goes on to say, "But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit." (Isaiah 14:14-15) In the ancient cosmology, God lived "above" in the heavens and mankind lived below on the earth. When we figured out that the earth was a globe instead of flat, we made some minor adjustments in our concept of divine location, but still kept the higher and lower descriptions of the realm of God versus the realm of mankind. Taking those terms literally lead to the early Russian cosmonauts returning from early space flights and reporting that they hadn't seen God. Today - at least when we stop and think about it - we're more likely to think of God as being with us, in and among us, rather than above and overhead.

When we read this story in the traditional way, seeing the tower as a symbol of unlimited pride and desire to be god-like, then there's a bit of humor in the story. Rather than building with stone and mortar, the people have chosen to use bricks which are less permanent - and tar, which is less stable. For such an ambitious project, they chose sub-standard building techniques. It's also humorous to note that if they were building a tower to reach into the dwelling place of God, they fell short, as God had to come down to look things over. All-in-all, it's a rather pitiful and laughable effort.

There is another way of hearing the story of the tower of Babel. In verse four, it seems clear that the motivation for building a city with a tower is that the people do not wish to be scattered abroad across the face of the whole earth. The whole text emphasizes that they are one people with one language. And God

seems to be displeased with the homogeneity, not the pride of the human race. The issue of excessive pride or the desire to become like gods is never really stated in the text. We have always just inferred that as the problem that God is dealing with. This isn't to say that excessive pride isn't a bad thing; it's just that it may not be the point in this particular story. God certainly isn't threatened by the tower. It isn't a matter of, "We've got to stop construction before they reach heaven." This isn't a story about a scared tyrant of a god, losing vengeance on people who have posed some sort of threat. Remember, we are dealing with the Lord who is good, sometimes in mysterious ways.

God created a world that works well at sustaining itself. Animals exhale carbon dioxide and plants use it to make oxygen. Grass is feed for cattle and cattle provide meat, milk, hides, and fertilizer. But God seems to revel in beauty and diversity as well as in practicality. So grass comes in many shades of green and many heights. We not only have cattle to eat, but sheep and goats, and other animals that graze on the grass. Rather than one or two kinds of trees to provide firewood and lumber to build shelter, there are hundreds of kinds of trees in all kinds of sizes, shapes, and shades of green - and some even make pecans! After two days up in the Smokey Mountains, I am freshly reminded that God seems to love diversity and beauty in his creation. So why would it seem odd to us that God saw one people and one language and decided that it would be great to have a world full of faithful people of different colors, sizes, shapes, ideas, and languages? The tower of Babel may not be a story of punishment, but of creativity!

Now, let's turn to the story of Pentecost. As Presbyterians, sometimes referred to as the "frozen chosen," we can be a little leery of the Holy Spirit. In some circles, worship that involves the Holy Spirit seems to involve shouting and shaking, moans and groans, speaking in what appear to be languages, but not any language that anyone can understand. It may even involve thrashing about on the floor and passing out. Even swaying back and forth with one or both arms raised up and calling out "Thank you, Jesus," is not a worship style that many of us find comfortable. And, for many of us, if we had some sort of ecstatic experience it would scare the wadding out of us and we'd keep it to our self so that others wouldn't worry about our sanity. But for many of us, this sort of twitching and shouting is what comes to mind when we think about receiving the Holy Spirit.

The Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit was very different from all that. Two things happen. There is the sound of a mighty wind. Then, divided tongues, like tongues of fire, appeared, and a tongue rested on each one of the people who were there. Several things strike me. First, the experience is public, that is to say, there are lots of witnesses in the room, about 120 people. Second, the experience is uniform and consistent. The experience is the same for each person and it happens to everybody, men and women, alike. Third, it seems to be pretty calm compared to contemporary reception of the Holy Spirit. No one is reported to have been frothing at the mouth, or having lost control of their body or consciousness. Fourth, the sound of this wind wasn't just experienced by the disciples in the house. No, it was heard out in the streets and a crowd gathered. Fifth, despite the miraculous event, not everyone was convinced.

In both this text and the story of the Tower of Babel, communication plays an important part. It's been said sometimes that God confused the language of humanity at Babel, and undid that at Pentecost. But that doesn't quite work. The reversal of Babel would be the creation of one common language. God doesn't undo the diversity that he created at Babel. Instead, that diversity is reaffirmed by giving the disciples the ability to speak in foreign languages, in the native language of other people. "On the day of Pentecost, Christianity became a religion with a divine sanction to multilingualism and to translation."¹

What message might we hear from this text for our lives today? Pentecost is often described as the birthday of the church. Don't get too hung up on that. There were about 120 people, men and women, apostles and disciples, who stayed together after Jesus ascended in to heaven. If you had said to them, won't you be glad when the church gets started, they might have replied, "So, what are we, chopped liver?"

That group had staying together in fellowship. They had been devoting themselves to prayer. They had been selecting church officials. Churches spend a lot of time doing those things. Then this loud sound arrived and tongues danced on each person. And everybody spilled out into the streets and told foreign immigrants about Jesus, and the kingdom of God, and about the good news of God's love for us all. The Holy Spirit sent them out, not only to make the church grow, but to make it a bouquet of diversity.

Acts 2:9-11 ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Talk about diversity! The people that the disciples talked to came from all over the known world, from every direction of the compass. And they spoke to them in their own language!

We like to gather for fellowship, for prayer and worship, and we elect elders and make sure we have our church officials in place. But, Pentecost shows us that we need to leave this sanctuary and go interact with other people, especially, people who aren't like us. If all of your friends are like you, then you need some new friends. If everyone you deal with is happily church-ed, then broaden your range.

I don't see any Parthians, Medes, or Elamites in Thomasville. But I do see a goodly number of Latinos and Latinas. Maybe we would do well to learn a bit of Spanish and offer to share God's love with them. We could use more diversity in this congregation. We're off to a start. We've got some mature folks and some younger folks. We've got native Carolinians and some from other places. People in this congregation have all kinds of educational backgrounds. Politically and theologically, we have pretty wide variation. But the bouquet that is this congregation is like a big arrangement of white mums with a few highlights of Baby's Breath, red carnations, and a frond or two of fern. This will be an even more beautiful community of God's people when we become even more diverse. And we will be lovelier and more acceptable in God's sight. The God who made sand dollars and swordfish, baby lambs and duck-billed platypus, turtles and giraffes, honeysuckle vines and Sequoia trees, and put all of the colors in the rainbow, is surely a God who loves diversity, finds beauty in variation, and places great value in difference. God made each of us unique, and we all have a unique and valuable contribution to make in the growth of the kingdom of God. Amen

¹ Margaret P. Aymer, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 17