



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

The Persistent Work of the Spirit

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Feast of Pentecost ~ June 9, 2019*

Genesis 11:1-9

Throughout the earth, people spoke the same language and used the same words. Now, as they moved east-ward, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. , They all said to one another, " Let us make bricks and bake them in the fire." They used bricks as building stones, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top can reach to heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, to keep us from being scattered over the face of the whole earth." YHWH came down to see the city and the tower these mortals had built. "They are a single people with a single language," YHWH said. "And this is but the beginning of their undertakings! Now there will be nothing too hard for them to do. Come, let us go down and baffle their language so that they can no longer understand one another." So YHWH scattered them over the face of the earth, and they had to stop building the city. It was named Babel, because YHWH made humans babble different languages through-out the world. It was from there that YHWH scattered them over the whole earth.

Psalm 104:25-35

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| 25 O Holy One, how manifold are your works; *
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. | you take away their breath,
and they die and return to their dust. |
| 26 Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great. | 31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth. |
| 27 There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan, *
which you have made for the sport of it. | 32 May the glory of God endure for ever; *
may the Holy One rejoice in all creation. |
| 28 All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season. | 33 God looks at the earth and it trembles; *
God touches the mountains and they smoke. |
| 29 You give it to them; they gather it; *
you open your hand, and they are filled with good things. | 34 I will sing to God as long as I live; *
I will praise my God while I have my being. |
| 30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; * | 35 May these words of mine find favor; *
I will rejoice in the Holy One. |

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they all met in one room. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a violent, rushing wind from heaven; the noise filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as she enabled them.

Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled. But they were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. They were amazed and astonished: "Surely all of these people speaking are Galileans! How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, as well as visitors from Rome—all Jews, or converts to Judaism—Cretans and Arabs, too; we hear them preaching, each in our own language, about the marvels of God!"

All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, "What does this mean?" But others said mockingly, "They've drunk too much new wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowd: "Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think-it's only nine o'clock in the morning! No, it's what Joel the prophet spoke of:

'In the days to come—it is our God who speaks-I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind. Your daughters and sons will prophesy, your young people will see visions, and your elders will dream dreams.

Even on the most insignificant of my people, both women and men, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

And I will display wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire and billowing smoke.

The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon will become blood before the coming of the great and sublime day of our God.

And all who call upon the name of our God will be saved.'

John 14:8-17

"Rabbi," Philip said, "show us Abba God, and that will be enough for us." Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen Abba God. How can you say, 'Show us your Abba'? Don't you believe that I am in Abba God and God is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is Abba God, living in me, who is accomplishing the works of God. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me, or else believe because of the works I do. The truth of the matter is, anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do—and greater works besides. Why? Because I go to Abba God, and whatever you ask in my name I will do, so that God may be glorified in me. Anything you ask in my name I will do. If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you."

Way back in the beginning, way back on the first pages of Genesis, we are told that all the peoples of the earth had one language and the same words. Everyone could understand everyone else...until one day...one day, God decided to confuse their language.

Now, confusing people's language seems like an awfully malicious thing for God to do, doesn't it? Indeed: confusing people's speech and rendering them unintelligible to one another is an absolute recipe for mayhem. Which is apparently just what God wanted. As Genesis tells us, God decided to scramble the speech of the Earth's people because God thought they were getting a little too confident, a little too ambitious.

You see, the Earth's people had organized themselves, and they had begun an ambitious building project. They were building a tower that reached into the heavens. They wanted to put their stamp on the face of the earth. Wanted to do something that said: "We are strong; we can build a great tower that reaches all the way to the heavens. From our tower, we can practically wave to the gods. Now that we're on their level, they don't seem quite so high-and-mighty anymore!"

Now, God was not at all pleased with the construction plans that the people were making. The people seemed to think that they were in charge, and that the Earth was their dominion.

So, as the people began construction at Babel, God came up with a plan to derail them. God had gotten really nervous about this project of theirs. God 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."

So God decided to confuse the people's language. This confusion divided the people into groups and they were scattered all over the Earth. No longer was humanity comprised of a single unified people.

Well, this is really a fantastically creative way of explaining how the diversity of peoples and languages first came to be, isn't it? It's an origin myth, *par excellence*. Well, yes...but it's also more. Because there is an important and fundamental anxiety at the center of this text. In this text, we see a God who is anxious about humans gaining too much power. Anxious enough that God is willing to create division, and the strife that will inevitably come along with it. God simply doesn't see any other way to curtail humanity's ambitions to establish totalitarian rule over all of creation.

God's response is troubling, isn't it? Just pages earlier in Genesis, God had established a covenant with Noah, after the flood God said:

"I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

Now, while God doesn't exactly violate this covenant when God confuses humanity's speech at Babel, it does seem as if God was having second thoughts about leaving humanity to its own devices. God was getting worried, it seems, that humanity was trying to take God's place.

And that we have done. And that we continue to do. Over and over again. Humans try to be God. Try to take God's place.

We try to build towers into the heavens, having no sense of boundaries or limits, no sense that Creation is a delicate and intricate balance of forces, no sense that the Creator has been trying again and again, gently and not-so-gently, to put us in our places.

The good news, of course, is that God eventually realized in the course of history that control might not be the best way to relate with humanity. God discovered that dividing us would cause ever more division. God discovered that we would resort to violence to protect what we thought was ours.

As God witnessed the vicissitudes of human life, God decided to build a special relationship with the Israelites, calling them to be a light to the nations, to show the world a people living in harmony with God and with all of creation. As time went on, God seems to have gotten even more ambitious. While chosen people, Israel, would always have a very special place in God's heart, God seemed to want to draw more and more of humanity into relationship, into harmony with God and with all of creation. So God sent One among us who endeavored to

draw the scattered nations back together. God sent One among us who habitually transgressed divisions and taught us to transgress them, too. God sent One among us who could speak to the heart of every person no matter their language or culture or condition.

In Jesus, then, God's inaugurated a mission to bring humanity back together, to restore the human family, to teach us to live peaceably and to love justice.

But of course, it simply couldn't stop with Jesus. Following his death and resurrection, Jesus was back for 40 days, showing his face in all kinds of places, reminding people that they did not need to be afraid to live as he did.

But eventually, Jesus returned to God. Those who loved Jesus were bereft at losing him again. But he had promised to be with them always. Always. So they waited for his presence in hope and trust.

And then it happened. As the story goes:

“The disciples 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.”

As the disciples all began to speak in other languages, a crowd gathered, with people from every nation and language under the sun. The crowd quickly discovered that they could understand what the disciples were saying. Every last one of them could understand. With joy, those in the crowd exclaimed: “We hear them speaking about God's deeds of power in our own languages.”

What an amazing moment it must have been! A message for everyone. A message of healing and love. What joy!

Now, what's fascinating to me here is that in this moment, the Spirit did not return the people to a single language, nor to a monoculture, as they had been at Babel. Rather, their diversity and difference remained. In and through the power of the Spirit, the disciples were able to communicate across difference, to communicate cross-culturally on that first Pentecost. The Good News could be easily shared with all. Because it was for all!

Indeed, when the Holy Spirit came, rather than “restoring humanity to a common language, She declared all languages holy and equally worthy of God's stories; She wove diversity and inclusiveness into the very fabric of the Church. She called the people of God to be at once the One and the Many.”¹

And for me, this is really extraordinarily Good News. Because it means that becoming a Christian isn't ultimately about conformity, no matter what you may have been told in the past by those who desire the predictability of a monochrome faith. Rather, becoming a Christian is about the richness of life in the Spirit. It's about learning to live in a way that can include more, and more, and more—always more. More people, more perspectives, more ideas. No one and nothing left out. The Spirit makes room for all!

Now this may sound a bit loosey-goosey at first. A spirituality without a center or a focus. But in fact, it takes a lot of discipline, a lot of courage, and a lot of inspiration to live this way—in communion with the breathtaking diversity of life inspired by the Spirit. Because it's easier—it's always easier—to stick with our own kind. It's easier to speak with those who already understand us, who require no translation. It's easier to go about our business, as if other people are mostly irrelevant to us. None of our business, not our problem.

But as Christians, we discover sooner or later, that everyone and everything is our business. Because God cares about all of it!

At the 11:00 o'clock service, several children will be baptized, and their parents and godparents will join the whole congregation in answering these vitally important questions from our baptismal covenant.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

You see—this is what life in the Spirit looks like: expanding our horizons of care, loosening the boundaries we draw between “us and them,” being permeable to the crazily beautiful diversity of the world that God has created and has called good.

The Christian life may not always look or feel very mystical or ecstatic, but the Spirit is always working in interesting ways—creating understanding, facilitating communication, instigating relationship. We can look for the activity of the Spirit wherever and whenever new understanding is breaking through.

Maybe it's even happening right now, somewhere in our city, as parents of some LGBTQ kids are attending their

first Pride and coming to better understand their children. Maybe it's even happening right here, somewhere in this church, as one of you is inspired to go back and try to work through a difference with a loved one: something that has seemed intractable, something that you just haven't been able to understand. This is the Spirit's work. Not always very flashy. But persistent....ever so persistent at breaking down the barriers between us.

The Spirit is among us, and though we may try to resist her inspiration, though we may sometimes wish that she would mind her own business....along with generations of our faithful forebears, may we learn to rejoice that: "Nevertheless... nevertheless, she persisted."

Amen.

ⁱ Adapted from: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2241-the-one-and-the-many>