

"Divided Tongues, Common Speech"

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 2022

York Center Church of the Brethren

Preacher: Jonathan Shively

I have never been in a tornado, for which I am deeply grateful. But a few years ago, in November 2013, my son Ben and I and a couple other members of the Highland Avenue CoB traveled south in Illinois to the east side of Peoria, a neighborhood in the small town of Washington, IL. An F4 tornado had roared its destructive path through this community, leaving its residents reeling and its buildings obliterated. Our task was simply: carry debris out of the basement that was all that was left of one family's home.

Fortunately the family was safe, having sheltered as recommended. But as we took a few minutes to rest and take in the scope of the devastation, the owner pulled out his phone and showed us video of the tornado as it came across the open land to the southwest of the neighborhood, growing closer and closer until it seemed like the owner was so mesmerized that he almost forgot to jump into his basement with the tornado nearly on top of him.

The visual images were arresting, but what stood out the most to the owner and in my memory of his story, was the sound, the absolutely deafening roar of the funnel of wind, rain, and debris.

"The rush of a violent wind filled the entire house where they were meeting."

In a small church building in East Los Angeles, our worship team from Pomona unpacked our gear and began warming up. The team had only been playing together for a couple of months, and our repertoire was limited. Not only was our musical presentation limited, but our religious knowledge and depth of faith was young. I was a new pastor, our keyboardist was a young adult Christian but new to Southern California, our bass player was a shy seeker who had married into our church, and the drummer was a friend of a friend.

At the invitation of Gilbert Romero on the occasion of a revival led by a visiting evangelist, we quickly worked our way through our three songs, at which time the evangelist moved to the front and began to speak. As she developed her cadence, she turned to our little band

of musicians, stoic behind our instruments like the good frozen chosen, and motioned for us to play.

For what seemed like days but was closer to an hour, we continued to reprise the three songs we knew as the fervor of the evangelist and the response of the congregation grew. As she exhorted those in attendance in both English and Spanish, the energy and intensity rose. Before too long we were immersed in a movement of the Holy Spirit expressed through speaking in tongues and emotional - physical responses.

Our wide-eyed little band continued on to the best of our abilities.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

The Christian celebration of Pentecost comes around every year, as does the original Jewish celebration of the Feast of Pentecost. Arriving 50 days after Passover, Jews celebrate the conclusion of the wheat harvest and recognize the beginning of a new period in Israel's history.

Luke, in writing the Book of Acts, purposefully aligns the inaugural events of the newly constituted church with the Jewish traditions, and the Christian calendar reflects those connections. The small gathering in Jerusalem of Jesus's faithful followers soon turned into a crowd. The crowd, affected by the Holy Spirit, broke into multiple languages.

It is not surprising that there were skeptics. Like our little worship band at Bella Vista, it must have been overwhelming and quite perplexing. Peter rises to refute the accusations of drunkenness and, recognizing the gravity of the moment, repeats the words of 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.'

In current expressions of our Brethren beliefs and practices, we don't talk much about signs. While some traditions might look at the happenings in our world today and declare the coming of the end of the world, we mourn the wars and natural devastation and violence and inequities of the world, but we're not likely to read them as indicators of any prophetic fulfillment. In fact we might prefer to understand the role of the prophet not so much about predicting the future but more so about calling to attention the shortcomings of and expectations for the present.

Peter is seeking to make sense of the present. He is also signaling a pivot point into the future.

Our first text today was the story of Babel, the confusing of the languages. The story is that God wanted to prevent the faithful from becoming content and established in only one place. In confusing the languages, they abandoned their plans for a power-increasing city and scattered throughout the land.

The story of Pentecost is in some ways the reversal and in some ways a reassertion of the story of Babel. It is a reversal because while the languages are still diverse, the understanding is now in common. The message of Jesus does not require an interpreter because the Holy Spirit has facilitated understanding.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were in the language minority? Perhaps traveling abroad, or in a neighborhood nearby, or in the presence of teenagers? If you were not familiar with the language, were you uncomfortable, threatened, anxious, curious? How did context matter?

I've been fortunate to worship with Brethren in Puerto Rico and Brazil. In neither case did I understand the language, but in worship and in fellowship I always understood the message. Perhaps that is a bit like the Pentecost experience of hearing in one's own understanding.

So while Babel put up barriers to understanding, Pentecost removed those barriers. What are our Babels today, the barriers that impede our understanding?

But there is a second dimension to the Babel - Pentecost connection. For those at Babel the confusion was necessary in order to send them throughout the world. For those in Jerusalem at Pentecost, the message given in common was to go throughout the world. In both cases the message is an evangelistic one, intended to make God and God through Jesus known throughout the world.

The impact of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the Christian experience of Pentecost, is the signal to the faithful remnant of Jesus followers, to move out, to go forth, to get to work, to spread the good news of Jesus.

It is at Pentecost that the Christian church becomes the witness and bearer of God's Spirit. The confusion of Babel is now resolved as each nation hears and understands the Word of God in its own language. The call to carry this understanding into the world is unmistakable.

Think of a time when an experience has convicted you. Perhaps it was a new idea you learned through study. Perhaps it was the impact of a mission trip. Maybe it was the influence of a particular person in your life. Did you have an energizing trip? Were you recognized for some accomplishment? Did you suffer a loss that has re-shaped your life?

I think of stories in which an experience has shaped the future course of someone's life. On the tragic-turned-positive side, singer Jennifer Hudson is an example. After her mother, brother, and nephew were brutally shot and killed by another family member, she established the Julian D. King Gift Foundation which aims to "provide stability, support and positive experiences for children of all backgrounds to help enable them to grow to be productive, confident and happy adults."

My weekday work is for Fox Valley Hands of Hope. We are a nonprofit that provides quality, compassionate grief support for those who are grieving a death loss. The lifeblood of our work is volunteers. Ken has been running a drop-in men's group for 14 years once a month on Saturdays. They've only missed three or four Saturdays in those 14 years. The men that come to this group are looking for a safe and honest space to process their losses. Like many of our volunteers, Ken began this work because of his own experiences after the death of his first wife. Her death, and his subsequent healing, motivated him to dedicate a major part of his life to supporting other men learning to live with their losses.

The message of Pentecost is in part a mysterious intervention by a power beyond our scientific and rational understanding. Somehow in the rush of wind and through divided, dancing tongues of flame God found yet another way to be present among God's people. That to me all seems pretty mysterious, kind of like those tongues in that urban LA sanctuary over 25 years ago.

But the message of Pentecost is also the stuff of real action, carried out by people like you and me that we know as the church. The message is that there is a power which is an alternative to the war, hatred, division, suffering, and loneliness that actively penetrates our world. That power is the power of God, demonstrated and lived out to its most radical extreme by Jesus. As Pentecost people, exposed to the breath and light of Yahweh, we are compelled to go forth into the world declaring this saving grace.

Of course we could have long discussions about what this evangelism looks like, but for today I invite you to think of it as telling a story, God's story with yourself as an actor in the story, a confessional approach to the gift of the Holy Spirit and presence of Jesus in your life.

As today's account of Pentecost affirms, our stories will be different, the language we use is likely to be unique, our perspectives will vary, as it should, the rich, diverse, deep, and compelling stories of Jesus's love for us — the roots however meet deep in the soil of the two testaments and the divided tongues are unified through the consistent message of the God of love and our testimonies will be infused with the Holy Spirit.

You may be asked, "What does this mean?" You may be asked, "Are you drunk? Are you crazy?" May you be free to say, "I am filled with the Holy Spirit and alive in Christ Jesus."

