

Native Language
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May 15, 2016

Genesis 11:1-9

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then 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.’ ⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And 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. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore 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.

Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All 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. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’ ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ¹³But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

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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.
¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.
²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Last week I encouraged us to open our eyes to the wonder in the world, all from God’s creative and giving hands. Would you believe today’s readings are just as much about the diverse wonder of God’s creation? Historically, the story of the tower of Babel has been read as a tale of God’s punishment of human arrogance. I know this is what I was taught growing up. People thought they were at least as mighty as God, if not better, and God put them back in their place. Granted, we are so frequently caught up in our own greatness that we forget to rely on God but this is not a reading about that. It opens “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’” These people were actively working toward homogeneity and they planned to keep it that way, turning from a nomadic people to people settled with roots – dwellings with bricks, hardened and durable for long-term construction.

This intended permanence is implied, too, by the tower and the city. The phrase which has confounded our understanding follows: “and let us make a name for ourselves...” Professor Ralph W. Klein explains, “In the Bible in general, making a name for oneself is never used to describe self-centeredness or pride. Rather, making a name implies an act of

establishing an identity that will endure.”¹ They were declaring their intent to stay together for forever and forever – “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

God, hearing this was their intent, and seeing their city as proof of their intent, changed their course, for God’s intent, as evidenced by the whole of creation, is abundant and beautiful diversity. Professor Klein continues, “Instead of YHWH scattering the people, it is better to translate ‘YHWH dispersed them from there over the surface of all the earth.’” He continues, “This dispersal reverses the people’s desire to stay in one place, but is not punishment...Cultural diversity is the consequence of God’s design for the world, not the result of God’s punishment of it. In this story the people desire uniformity, and God desires diversity.”² While God says, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do,” we would be right in reading, “If they’re already thinking of sticking together and staying the same, the more time they have to think about this, the more determined they will be to keep it so.” And so across the face of the earth God sent us.

Keep in mind that this is what is considered an origin story, an explanation of how we got where we are – in this case, how we got to be diverse peoples. We are a people who desire understanding and this story feeds our need. By the time we reach the story of Pentecost, people had long come to accept that the world was filled with different languages and different customs, and again, they had, in clusters, chosen an identity which they expected to endure. In the best and worst iteration, “We are not like you.” The statement itself is neither good nor bad but how it is lived out. Knowing we read story after story in the gospels about others who are not like the Jewish people (think Good Samaritan and the Samaritan woman at the well), and so many more in the Hebrew Bible, we can pick up that different was understood as bad, other was bad. Again, not God’s intent. So we arrive at Pentecost and find the next redirection in order to realign with God’s intent, rather than ours.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p. 5.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, pp. 5 and 7.

The Holy Spirit comes and unites our differences, not into sameness but into blessed diversity. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” God does not attempt to undo our variety but makes our variety key to the identity of a reunified people. Dean and Professor Michael Jinkins speaks of God’s intent for community saying, “Communion assumes difference – not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or tribe.”³ Again, the wonder in this one created world is that it has more varieties than we can count and variations within those remarkable varieties. And this is God’s intent!

Uncomfortable with God’s diversity sometimes though, we respond as the gathered peoples from afar and we make excuses, dismissing what unites us, saying “They are filled with new wine.” This is a fluke, not a sign of what is possible. One way of doing this which is too easy is making distinctions of race as proof of insurmountable differences. Our family at Southminster has recently studied an excellent resource which tackles the falsehoods of race in ways I had never imagined. Later this summer, we’ll use this resource, too. Of course, race is just one of the many, many, many ways in which we understand others to be different – you’re Jewish, Muslim, or Catholic and I’m Protestant. You didn’t go to college and I did. You have jumped from job to job for years and I’ve worked the same job for my whole life. You’re a Bears fan and I’m a Packers fan. Or, even like the peoples from afar – you don’t speak the same language as me. God says “This is great!” while we say “I don’t think I’m comfortable with the ways you are not like me.”

If we **are** comfortable and celebrate the differences of others, then there is scrutiny on us – you must be crazy, you’re focusing on the wrong things, we need to stick together with those like us. When we celebrate differences, we object: “That is not God’s intent!” In celebrating Pentecost, in communing in red with those very different people sitting right next to us, maybe even from our own blood, we proclaim that God rejoices in a people come together, a body with many members. Paul wrote to the people in Corinth to exalt their differences, saying, “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p. 18.

make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.”⁴ Our challenge to live out is to lift up the importance of the ones who are different from us because we could not be who we are without that which makes them different from us.

There will always be those who do not understand – frequently we will be the ones not understanding, or at the very least needing reminding – but we hold on until “the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day,” what Paul refers to as the time when we no longer see in a mirror, dimly, but face to face.⁵ Last week’s reading from Luke had Jesus telling the disciples to wait to be clothed with power from on high. Today’s reading from Acts is the completion of that waiting. Just like those disciples, in our best moments, we welcome the Holy Spirit, that **inspiration**, from the same root as Spirit, that wind, and we connect with those who are not us, we transcend our fear of difference. This day of Pentecost is another reminder of all that is possible when we welcome the Spirit. Hold fast to this transcendent power and so be part of God’s intent. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, come, we pray. Amen.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:14-20.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12.