

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious and Loving God, as you once declared, “See, I am making all things new.” So now, through your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to your transforming word in Scripture. Grant us a new vision of the height, depth, and breadth of your trustworthy and true love, that we may be inspired to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, reflecting the new creation you have begun in us. Amen.

Genesis 11: 4-9

⁴ They said, “Come, let’s build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and let’s make a name for ourselves so that we won’t be dispersed over all the earth.”

⁵ Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the humans built. ⁶ And the LORD said, “There is now one people and they all have one language. This is what they have begun to do, and now all that they plan to do will be possible for them. ⁷ Come, let’s go down and mix up their language there so they won’t understand each other’s language.” ⁸ Then the LORD dispersed them from there over all of the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ Therefore, it is named Babel, because there the LORD mixed up the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD dispersed them over all the earth.

Acts 2:1-6, 12-21

² When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁵ There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages.

¹² They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”

¹⁴ Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! ¹⁵ These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! ¹⁶ Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.*

*Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.*

18

*Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

19

*I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.*

20

*The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.*

21

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

scattering of languages

Humans have this tendency to try to be like God. To try to understand how best to gain all of God's knowledge and power. This was seen in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and we also see it in the Genesis passage this morning. In this passage, which is often called "The Tower of Babel," the people say, "Come, let's build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and let's make a name for ourselves so that we won't be dispersed over all the earth." But this tower, having its top in the sky, is best understood as the people wanting to reach heaven.

For them, this was similar to the Greeks' Mount Olympus. In ancient Greek mythology, Mount Olympus was believed to be the home of the twelve Olympian gods and goddesses, the most powerful deities in the pantheon. It was a celestial realm, veiled from mortal eyes by clouds, where they resided and presided over the affairs of both humans and immortals. The people are trying to build their own Olympus in a way. But, as we know, God isn't as much of a fan of people being on the same level as God. So, God says, "Come, let us go down and mix up their language there so they won't understand each other's language." ⁸ Then the LORD dispersed them from there over all of the earth, and they stopped building the city." This seems like a big deal to God. They aren't going to just allow humanity to stick with this plan of being together only, as this siloed thing. God literally scatters humanity around the world. We will come back to this.

In the Second Testament passage, in the middle, it says, "There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages." This is

moments after the Spirit has descended into this gathering and lit tongues of flames on each of them. Just like in the first testament, we can't fully understand this phenomenon. We don't really have these same occurrences anymore. But that genuinely falls into the magic of the story. That cements this extraordinary event of the church's start.

The disciples were asked if they were drunk, and the people were confused that they could all suddenly understand the people speaking. But Peter stands with the disciples and quotes the prophet Joel. Joel says, "*God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.*" And Peter is saying that this is the situation right now! The Spirit has poured out upon God's people, children are prophesying, seeing visions, and the elders are dreaming. This is happening in real time, Peter is responding in the same way that all the people are. Everyone is asking questions, and everyone is probably a bit stressed. Keep in mind, the disciples were simply sitting around and existing together as far as we know. A new disciple has been added to the 12, to replace Judas. And from our scripture this morning, we know they were all together when the Spirit came in.

The sound of the Spirit rushing down was so loud that it drew a crowd to this area. And that's when the people gathered around heard the disciples speaking in other languages. And we think about the fact that we've seen this exact thing happen before.

So, to connect our stories this morning, we have a moment of our own mythology of the start of our church. It is mythology- even if we believe it's true and we feel confident in the Spirit's movement through this history, the genre of stories is mythology. So, we get these beautiful, magical-seeming stories of the Spirit at work. First, in a way that scattered people and language and created the vast array of our human experience around the globe. Second, in a way that brought language and the Spirit to hundreds of people, bringing them to understand and follow Christ.

As we hear these stories, we may feel annoyed or even frustrated that we don't see the Spirit work in the same way anymore. We don't hear about these tongues of fire; we don't have people scattered across the globe from one tower. And still, we see the work of the Spirit in our world. We see the work of the Church in our world. Though it does take a specific amount of paying attention in a different way. It seems like in our world now, the Spirit speaks in different ways that are a bit quieter. I want you to think about ways you've seen the Spirit at work.

For me, I know this sounds a little woo-woo, but if I hear something multiple times within a week from completely different conversations, I consider that to be the Spirit talking to me. A few months ago, I was talking with my therapist about feeling anxious, and she said, "Well, chemically, the reaction to anxiety and the reaction to excitement are the same thing to our brains." I was shocked! What a cool, fun fact! Well, that same week, I was talking to my clergy coach and mentioned just *having* anxiety. And she tells me the exact same fun fact. I was amazed. It felt like the Spirit telling me to take a breath and start to try to rewire the anxious

feelings I was having into excitement for the future. Now, I am not magically cured of my anxiety. However, I am able to spend just a moment when I start feeling anxious to consider what I could be excited about instead. It has helped a little! I'm still working at it.

I know that's not a tongue of fire over my head moment for most of y'all. I know that it's not God scattering us across the globe to continue the work of God. But! It is still the work of the spirit.

God is still working. The Spirit and the Church are still alive and well. God's work can't be snuffed out simply by time. This week, and as we continue into the summer, I want to encourage you to look at and study ways that the Spirit is working around you. We aren't great, as Americans, Christians, or Presbyterians, at seeing the way the Spirit works. We want to see the big things. We want to see the huge moves God is making. However, the quiet ways that God moves are important too.

Please pray with me