

First Presbyterian Church- Ware Shoals

June 09, 2019

“Spirit’s Fire, Human’s Language”

### **Genesis 11: 1-9**

**11** All people on the earth had one language and the same words. **2** When they traveled east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them hard.” They used bricks for stones and asphalt for mortar. **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: 1-8, 12-21**

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. **7** They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans,

every one of them? **8** How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?

**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.*

((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God))

In our scriptures today, we see two different ways that God uses language. We read the “prehistory” in the story of the Tower of Babel. This is the story that the Israelites used to explain language and why our languages are different from each other. Using the Tower of Babel, people were able to point to the reason we have different languages and why diversity in the world is important to society’s success. Then we read the story of the first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended and the Church began speaking in different languages.

The languages that the church began speaking in were not necessarily what we would consider “speaking in tongues”, but they were speaking in languages that the immigrant people of Israel spoke. They began speaking in different languages that people could understand. In a way, they were bringing people together using language. However, It is important to remember that the story of Pentecost is not a reversal of the Tower of Babel, the opposition of course between scattering people with language and bringing them together. Instead, these stories create a larger narrative together of how God can use language in our lives. Within this, there is the ability to bring diversity, and bring unity through that diversity into the Body of the Church.

In reading the story of the Tower of Babel, one of my favorite parts of this scripture is when the humans decide to make a tower out of bricks to make a name for themselves, creating a reputation for themselves. Keep in mind, these humans are literally “the sons of Adam,” they are made of dust. In a very modern paraphrase, they have said to each other, “let’s make a name for ourselves using the dust because we come from the dust.” It seems like this idea of creating out of the dust is nodding back to creation and looks back to what humanity knows to be true from Genesis 3, which is, “we are dust and to dust we shall return.” God created out of the dust, so surely humanity can create a name for ourselves from the dust as well.

God is watching the “sons of Adam” create and build. Have you ever watched a child build something out of legos, or building blocks? Depending on how old the child

is, the tower could be anything from a straight line of blocks, to a castle built meticulously piece by piece. I imagine this is what God saw as humanity was creating the bricks to build a tower that could reach the heavens. And in the end, God still scattered humanity, making all languages different and intentionally making it more difficult for people to remain in one spot. Also, look closely at verse 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.’” The goal of this tower is to create a central spot that all of humanity can gather together, so they can’t be spread apart. So they don’t have to worry about going outside of the comfort of their city.

And after all of it, God looks at the efforts of the humans, and says, “Sure... that’s decent, but how about this...” and scatters all languages one from another, from another. Now, this isn’t the action of a God who is a vengeful tyrant of a god. The God who scatters the languages is good in mysterious ways. God has bigger plans for humanity than to remain in one city and with one language forever. For instance, God is setting up the long game plan of Pentecost, when the diversity of language is used to bring people together rather than separate them.

Like this instance in the Tower of Babel, the story of Pentecost has been told so many times, we may not truly read it anymore. We may just assume we’ve heard it enough that we know what it says. However, there are parts of this story that are really important to pay special attention to. The timing, the people involved, the scripture used within the story are all pieces of this narrative that we tend to quickly read over.

In terms of timing, this festival is originally called the “Festival of Weeks” or Shavuot **\*\*sha-voo-wot\*\*** This is one of the 3 great festivals in Judaism and celebrates the first fruits of the harvest. But it also celebrated the giving of the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. The author of Luke and Acts is probably making an intentional connection between the celebration of the Festival of Weeks which would have been seen as celebrating the birth of the chosen people of God, and the celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which can be seen as the birth of the church.

In thinking about the people involved, the story of Pentecost doesn't just say "the disciples" were sitting in an upper room like we often mishear. The text literally says, "they were all together in one place." This probably meant the entire body of the Church at that time, which we know from Acts 1:15 was roughly 120 people. It is important to remember this specifically includes women, men, the Twelve disciples, and many people who were unnamed followers. It wasn't just the disciples affected by the Spirit. This is the event that shows a pattern in Acts, the Holy Spirit doesn't discriminate on human standards of who is worthy of it.

Finally, the scripture that Peter quotes isn't just a random verse. It is a verse that speaks specifically to God's imminent reign and the fact that God will redeem Their people. The quote from Joel 2:28-32 was written at a time of political occupation, and Peter using it was meant to speak to the eventual divine overthrow of the Roman Empire. The quote is also affirming the eschatological view that the coming of Jesus has started this Pentecost. That all people-- women, men, children, unnamed people, young and old-- all people are given the Holy Spirit as a gift and the day of the Lord is beginning.

These points are important to remember because they give a larger context to the passage, they help explain why the language being diversified was important, they provide a method of further understanding the importance of continuing to celebrate Pentecost. The scriptures we've read today both speak to language, and God's plans for humanity, and God's goodness and the diversity God is seeking in the Church. There was a greater plan when God scattered the nations and languages at the Tower of Babel, and there was a greater plan when God brought the nations and languages together at the first Pentecost.

What if we still told people about God in their own language- and I don't mean English, or Spanish, or German. What if we went out and told people exactly what they needed to hear at exactly the right moment? The Spirit has already set itself in our lives as if it were tongues of fire. So what is stopping us from listening when the Spirit whispers softly what we should tell people, or tells us how we should treat other

humans, or makes an old friend pop into our heads. Maybe that's a nudge to reach out to them, maybe there is a nudge that the Spirit is still telling us to move. Are we listening?

When humanity was building their city, with the Tower of Babel reaching to heaven, they were staying in their comfort zone. They were trying to keep themselves within a bubble that they assumed God could not scatter them. But God saw what they were doing and scattered them anyway, creating language and scattering them around the world. God said, "let's go down and mix up their language." When God decided to scatter the people, humanity was moved out of their comfort zone all on their own. We know that God was intentional in scattering because it was within God's plan that humanity would not just stay in one place, or stay in their comfort zone.

When the church was in an upper room, after Jesus' death, they didn't know what would happen next and they didn't know how they would go on without the leadership of Jesus. But, God came down and set the Spirit within them as if it were tongues of fire. God did not accept the comfort zone of that upper room or the comfort zone of only speaking to each other in their own language. Instead, God scattered the language once again and showed the Church that others were welcome as well. All were able to hear the Word in their own language while the Church was preaching to them. God began the church as we know it on the day of Pentecost with the Spirit coming down to bring people out of their comfort zone and further God's plan.

On this Pentecost, we must be aware that God continues to call us out of our comfort zones. God looks at our efforts to maintain the status quo, and stay together with the people we feel safe with and calls us to scatter. We have to hear when the Spirit is talking to us and calling us to change what we are doing when we are resisting God's plan.

Please pray with me,

Holy and Awesome God,

We come to you on this Pentecost as people who have consistently sought to find our comfort zones instead of following your plan when you have called us to scatter.

God, please find us as we hide in the upper rooms, and continue to send your Spirit into our lives and our mouths to continue to lead and teach your people. We ask for your guidance on how best to leave the comfort zones you are calling us out of, and to go where you're calling us as well. In your most holy name, Amen.