

"God Pours Out His Spirit " Acts 2:1-11 Pentecost 2024

Our primary text today is from the book of Acts, but it's critical backbone is the explanation from Genesis about the explosion of languages at the tower of Babel. So, There are three things we should observe in this story. The first is that people had a common language. They could understand each other. There was no hindrance to their communication.

That's pretty much an ideal situation. Think of it: When you come to Canada as a foreigner, you realize how important language is. Wherever you go, people speak in a way that you as a newcomer simply cannot understand. That is frustrating. It excludes you from the rest of society in which you try to settle. It builds invisible walls between us and them. It is so inefficient and so frustrating.

And the frustration only gets worse when you try to learn the language and bump into invisible walls inside your brain. I know people who, year after year, attend English language courses. And every year they start from scratch again, because they fail to grasp the mysteries of the language. That's why some say that English is the language of heaven. It takes an eternity to learn it. To which somebody commented: "If English is the language of heaven, I don't want to go there."

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Don't you think that having a common language would be fantastic? To be able to understand one another on a deep level, to have the same culture, the same frame of reference? That was the situation before the tower of Babel was built.

But then comes a second observation. When there were no hindrances to communication and collaboration, and when new technology opened new opportunities, people became proud. Their ambitions went sky-high. They felt so confident about what they could achieve together that they decided to try and eliminate God from their lives and their world altogether.

The tower of Babel was a kind of temple. But its main feature was not the interior, like in most temples. The main feature was the stairs that led around the tower like a spiral staircase to the top. Mankind wanted to reach the heavens on their own. They wanted to conquer the universe and penetrate the spiritual world by their own effort. They wanted to make themselves believe that a united humanity was more powerful than God. In fact, they wanted to forget God altogether and get on with life. Their motto was this: If we unite our physical, spiritual, intellectual and scientific efforts, nothing will be impossible for us.

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That attitude and those ambitions have never really changed—not even in a world with thousands of different languages and cultures and millions of reasons to misunderstand one another. And today, it is becoming ever stronger than before. Human communication across languages and cultures is becoming more and more common. Global and social media create a new culture of their own, where not only the young generation, but even increasingly people of my age feel very much at home. Today, we are building a new tower of Babel. And that new tower has at least two significant elements.

The first element is intellectual. We call it scientific materialism. This worldview claims that everything that is, and everything that happens, can be explained scientifically, by natural sciences. That implies that everything that cannot be explained that way does not exist or happen. In this way, scientific materialism has managed to eliminate God from the equation of life altogether.

This worldview is characterized by a frightening optimism. New atheists believe that “god” is to blame for all our problems—for violence, hatred and warfare, for discrimination, racism and segregation. They claim that science has all the answers—or at least will have all the answers—to the problems we face today. Science

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will solve the problem of global warming, of air pollution, of nuclear waste storage, of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, of HIV and Ebola.

That's what they claim. And once religion has been eliminated completely, the world will be at peace and remain at peace.

But today's tower of Babel also has a non-material element to it. You find it in the many forms of post-secular New Age spirituality. The New Age movement does not recognize God the way the Bible reveals him to us. For them "god" is not a person or a power outside of us. The divine is inside of us. It is part of our humanity. Our bodies are temples of the divine spirit.

And that is why transcendental meditation, yoga, and all sorts of fitness and mindfulness hypes have become so important. Self-help guides, personal trainers, and life coaches make far-reaching promises: Nothing is impossible for you, if you really want it. Because ultimately, we are divine.

The third thing to observe in the story of the tower of Babel is how God disrupted the communication and the unity of the people by "confusing their language." He created confusion and misunderstanding between them. And as a result, people broke up. They dispersed. And their common effort to reach the heavens was abandoned. It was a complete failure.

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It seems to me that today God does not even need to intervene. It looks to me as if we are doing a pretty good job ourselves in creating confusion and disagreement. Let me give two examples.

One is the political development around us. Look at two organizations that were established with the specific purpose of creating and maintaining peace, justice and prosperity. One is the United Nations, established after World War II in 1948. The other is the NATO, the roots of which stem from 1949. They were founded in a spirit of optimism: United we shall stand. Working for a better world without war.

And look at these organizations today. The United Nations is powerless in the face of the escalating conflicts in the world. The same countries that wage war around the world, paralyze the UN with their veto right. And NATO is showing that it is largely toothless. It is slowly disintegrating. Countries promise to support NATO and then when it comes time to putting money on the line, they back out.

The other development I think of, is that of the church throughout its history to this very day. Today we recount the history of that first Pentecost. We call it the birthday of the Christian Church: the one holy, apostolic, and universal church of Christ

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Jesus. When God pours out his Holy Spirit on that first little bunch of Jesus' disciples, he reverses the process that he initiated in Babel.

First, God reaches down to humankind. In Babel people tried to reach to the heavens—a project that was doomed to fail. At Pentecost, God reached down to earth. This was not the first time. He had done that once before. On Christmas, in Jesus, God became one of us, to live among us and to die for our salvation.

But at Pentecost, he came down in the form of the Holy Spirit to stay. Those who try to reach the heavens by their own human endeavor are driven by proud ambition. But God comes down to those who are poor in Spirit, meek, and humble; to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Those who claim that our bodies are temples are right. But the divine that lives in us is not our own personality, as New Age spirituality wants to make us believe. The God who created heaven and earth and whose revelation we find in the Bible, and more specifically in Jesus Christ, pours out his divine Spirit into our lives and hearts. That is a gift from God, not something that is part of our personality from birth. And we can receive God's Spirit only in and through faith—that relation where we put our trust in God and pledge our loyalty to God, and where God shows his faithfulness

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through the gift of saving grace. Only if we empty ourselves of our ambitions, our self-righteousness, and our pride, can God fill us with his Spirit.

Second, God unites his people. There is something about our roots that divides or unites us. When I walked through Multan and Karachi in Pakistan and I heard someone speak English, I was immediately attentive. It resonates with something deep inside of me. When Canadians go on holiday to far-off lands, they tend to connect with other Canadian people, people they would never even talk to back home. It is the common roots, expressed in a common language. When people from all over the world heard Galileans speaking in their mother tongue or dialect, it immediately created a bond. “Hey! They speak my language!”

Sadly, the truth is that hearts seldom communicated directly. Usually, they use a complicated chain of signal converters. My heart—i.e. my emotion—formulates a thought to my brain that is verbalized in my mouth. Sound waves transport that message to your ear, which converts it to a thought in your brain, which in turn arouses emotions in your heart. When you think of it that way, it really is a miracle that we can communicate with one another, even though we are from the same culture and use the same language.

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But if the brains still must translate the ideas from one culture to another or from one language to another, the chance of getting your message across becomes a lot smaller.

That is why it is so important to have the Word of God or the Gospel in your mother tongue. And that is why hundreds or thousands of missionaries spend a lifetime in remote regions of the world to translate the Bible or parts of it into the languages that still do not have the Word of God available. This is why I volunteered to be on the board of directors for the Lutheran Bible Translators of Canada. This mission must continue!

On the day of Pentecost, God bridged that communication gap through a special gift of the Spirit—the gift of tongues, as we often call it. What happened exactly, we don't know. But we do know that everybody heard the proclamation of the great wonders of God in their own language, even though the Galileans who were speaking, did not know those languages. The Holy Spirit bound the people together and gave them a common language. That creates unity.

Third, God inspires his people. What is relevant in the story of Pentecost is not just that people heard the Galileans speak each in their own language or dialect. What matters more is what they heard the Galileans say: the content of the message. The Holy Spirit

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inspired the believers to praise God. Don't think in terms of a charismatic or Pentecostal worship event with song and ecstasy. The disciples specifically declared the wonders of God. The Spirit inspired them to do so.

Sometime earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples that they were going to be put on the spot to witness of him under difficult circumstances. And he had encouraged them saying: "Don't worry beforehand about what to say, for the Holy Spirit will give you the words to speak when you need them." That is what we see happening here. It is not Peter who gives this brilliant evangelistic speech. It is the Spirit of God. It is not Peter who touches the hearts of thousands of people that day. It is the Spirit of God.

The events of that first Christian Pentecost call us to be sensitive to God's presence in our lives and in our community, and to the words that God wants to communicate to us. He calls us to be one, inhabited and inspired by the same Spirit of God, and bound together in his love. Let then our lives, as individual believers in Jesus Christ, and as his community, reflect the spirit of Pentecost every day. Amen.