

“Babel to Pentecost”
May 29, 2022

Genesis 11:1-9
Psalm 87
Acts 2:1-23

In the wake of the shootings in Buffalo, Representative Liz Cheney said that “The House GOP leadership has enabled white nationalism, white supremacy, and anti-Semitism,” adding, “History has taught us that what begins with words ends in far worse.”

“What begins with words ends in far worse.”

Maybe so.

Pentecost is a day on which we in the church consider words, their power and their possibilities. We consider our human capacity for language and our human capacity for destruction.

We consider our human ability to listen and to understand.

And we ultimately find hope for our lives in these days in those ancient stories.

Let’s begin with that story about the origin of different languages.

Remember, this is not a historical report. It is not the still uncertain conclusions of linguists or anthropologists about the origin of language or the multiplicity of languages. It is *myth* in the best sense of the word—telling a story and, by doing that, attempting to better understand the ways of God and the ways of human beings. It is such a good story that we’ve been telling it for thousands of years.

As is often the case in Genesis, God seems to act in very human ways when dealing with humans: walking in the garden in the cool of the evening and, here, coming down to check out how things are going on this planet.

How are these human beings getting along?

What are they up to?

And—Oh, this is interesting—a city and a tower which mortals have built. God considers the work done by one common people with one common language. Can you sense the, what?—fear or jealousy—when God says: “This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

Then and there, God confuses their language and scatters the people over the face of the earth.

That should solve the problem.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a story told by people who encountered other peoples, other tribes, other nations each with their own different customs, their own different words, and even their own different gods. Yet for all their differences there were those human constants and similarities: hunger and thirst, music and dance, a desire to thrive and prosper, a love of their land, and the hope for the well-being of their children and their children's children in that land—all human goods, and yet the source of so much pain and conflict.

This, then, is not only a story about the origin of language but also a story about the scattering of people and growing suspicion and ultimately enmity between people. “Babel,” a word that means “the gate of God,” is here connected to the Hebrew word that we translate as “confuse.”

God's judgment confuses the people and sends them out over the face of the earth. Or maybe this confusion, this scattering, is simply the result of our own very human inability to listen to one another.

This is a story about the separation of one nation from another. It is a story about the alienation of people who, while of one divine origin, became many. It is a story of about the separation from one another that we all know, about the alienation from the best in ourselves, and our alienation from God.

That is to say, this is the all-too-familiar story of sin. And it continues to be our story as scattered, separated, and alienated people.

Still, those who told this story, those who kept it in their sacred scriptures, those who knew the devastation and destruction caused by this separation, this sin, always held to the hope that this would change. They looked toward the time when the people of the world would find some common ground, some unity. They hoped that all of us might know once more our common status as those created in the very image of God, as the children of the living God and the sisters and brothers of one another.

They created songs like the psalm that we shared this morning to reflect this hope.

Look! Behold! On the holy mountain of Zion stands the city of Jerusalem. This city is not built by those who say: “Come let us make bricks and build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.” This is a city that needs not strive for heaven for its very foundations are placed by the Holy One.

And listen! This psalm sings of the most amazing thing: Rahab—that is the nation of Egypt—Rahab and *Babel*, yes *that* Babel, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia—people of enemy nations—*these*, the Psalmist says, *these* are all born in God's holy city.

Imagine, as one Old Testament scholar does: “Large, overpowering mythically evil empires, Egypt and Babylon, smaller threatening nations, Philistia and Tyre, and the alien and far away people of Ethiopia” all have birthright citizenship in Jerusalem. The glorious things spoken of this city are that “all the world is included in this city and benefits from its blessings and the love that God extends to it.”¹

In this song, God is keeping a record of births. Yes, once again God seems very human—or maybe this is yet another reflection of the hope that we humans might sometimes act in ways that approach the divine. God is keeping a record of births and announces of all people, all nations: “This one is born here.” Jerusalem—the city of God—is the birthplace of all people, the place where all may gather in peace, the place where all, regardless of origin, are brought into the household of God.

This is a grace-filled announcement of good news: the inclusion of all people into the love of God.

Should we be surprised, then, when we hear Jesus, who was raised with songs like this, telling his followers: “Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you.”

The early Christians used Zion as a way of speaking about church as a home for those who followed in the way of Jesus Christ. In the light of Psalm 87, such a home becomes a place of welcome for all people.

I hope that you’re beginning to see the significance of the Christian story of Pentecost and coming to a sense of why we tell the stories and sing the songs that we do on this day. Tongues of fire, rushing wind, all sorts of languages spoken and understood by all sorts of people are used to draw our attention once more to what is happening in Jerusalem.

People of many nations came to Jerusalem fifty days after the Passover celebration for the festival that remembered the giving of the Law to Moses. These Jewish people meet up with a group of the followers of Jesus—also Jewish—who had stayed in Jerusalem after the crucifixion and resurrection. They are waiting, as Jesus had told them to, waiting to be clothed in power, as Jesus told them they would be.

People of many nations had come to worship God and suddenly they hear the good news of God’s power and God’s love announced in ways that they can understand—in their own languages.

Peter announces that the hope of the Psalmist is being fulfilled. And by the gift of the Spirit the people hear and understand. The curse of Babel is being reversed and God’s Spirit, the Spirit of life, falls upon all people.

This is the beginning. From Jerusalem the followers of Jesus will go out into all the earth with the message that God loves all people, that God loves all creation. It is a new scattering, this time for the sake of gathering people together. Quite often that message will be obscured and hard to hear. But often enough it brings health, wisdom, beauty, and courage to those who hear it. Often enough it brings power to the powerless, freedom to the captive.

The hope of the Psalmist and the promise of Pentecost are not complete. We know that.

Even today we build our cities and our towers to make a name for ourselves.

Even today we know that nations and races and people hold great animosity toward one another and are more than ready to act with hostility. We are scattered, separated, alienated, and we still look at one another with suspicion. Our speech is not understood, nor do we understand the speech of others.

Recall God's evaluation of Babel: "This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." Rocketing into the heavens, communicating instantly with people around the world in a myriad of languages, destroying our planet—nothing is impossible for us.

Still, we proclaim hope.

Still, we announce the promise of Pentecost—the promise that all people—all of us created in the image of God—with our individuality and our diversity intact—all people will hear as they are able that they are loved by God and charged to love one another and to care for this earth, our home. We celebrate the promise of Pentecost in the church, but we in the church own neither the promise nor the reality of Pentecost. God's Spirit is given for all people in all places with all languages. It is given as the Spirit of Life that empowers everyone.

What begins with words might yet end in something far better.

Let us, then, live in that Spirit, in that promise, with that hope—with ears to hear the good news of God's love for all people.

¹ Johanna Bos, "Psalm 87," *Interpretation*, July 1997, pg. 285.