

Genesis 11:1-9

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17, (25-27)

It's always a joy to get to the celebration of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, and hear the reading from Genesis about the Tower of Babel and the reading from the Acts of the Apostles about the coming of the Holy Spirit and then sections from John's gospel on Jesus' final words and conversations with his disciples. On the surface of things, it all seems so simplistic and straightforward. But we know better, don't we? There is nothing simplistic or straightforward about the Bible, is there? There are multiple interpretations and much treasure to be gleaned with every reading. This year is no exception. Here are a few things for us to contemplate when we hear these three passages.

The Tower of Babel is a familiar story. At that time humanity was united by a single language and had settled in a single place, the land of Shinar. They made bricks and mortar and began to build a city and a tower up to heaven. According to Genesis, when God saw what they were doing, God decided to scatter them abroad over all the face of the earth and he confused their language so they wouldn't be able to understand each other. It would appear from these passages that God was worried about how powerful they might become otherwise. This particular passage has been used for centuries to justify keeping different races of people, some with different languages, separate from one another. It's almost as though the interpreters of this passage had decided that diversity...of language and culture and ethnicity...was a divine punishment, not something to be celebrated. We know from Jesus about the nature of God and Jesus did not show us a God who was worried about being overpowered. Maybe...just maybe... God scattered them because they were not living up to God's mandate (Genesis 1:28) when God said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." You can't fill the earth if you don't scatter. You have to move out. You have to migrate. And when you do, different languages and customs and cultures develop. Before the story of the Tower of Babel, God had just said the same thing to Noah and his sons after the flood (Genesis 9:1) "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." They didn't do it. So God intervened. God did something about it. And God's timing is perfect.

Fast forward to the passage from the Acts of the Apostles. On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit swirled its way through that tiny room and left tongues of fire on the heads of each of the disciples, the Holy Spirit doesn't squelch the diversity of human language but instead allowed each person to hear the proclamation of the Good News in their *own* language.

The scene in Jerusalem was already chaotic long before the Holy Spirit showed up. This town was overflowing with out-of-towners who had flocked to Jerusalem for the Jewish Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, which just happens to fall 50 days after Passover. It is one of three Feasts, one of them being Passover, that required all able-bodied Jewish men to travel to Jerusalem to offer first fruits of the harvest to God and to worship in the Temple in gratitude. So Jerusalem was positively teeming with men and their families from the four corners of the known world.

Nothing is more comforting in a strange place with all kinds of languages filling your ear than to hear words in your own mother tongue. It is a familiar sound that is balm for the soul. So when those simple, uneducated, bumbling fishermen from Galilee began speaking fluently in languages they had never heard before, everyone paused. And all their listeners hung on every word in their own language. Had it not been for each one hearing the Good news in his own language, they might not have paid any attention at all to these over-excited and raving fishermen. They might not have heard the Good News at all. There has been much speculation through the years that the disciples speaking in different tongues was an antidote to the jumbled languages at the tower of Babel. But if that had been the case, it wouldn't have been that the disciples spoke a variety of different languages; it would have been that the hearers of the disciples words now fluently understood Hebrew rather than their own language. But that's not how God arranged things in this story. And God's timing is perfect.

The disciples needed only to step outside their door to go into all the world and preach the gospel. They didn't have to travel great distances to strange places. God had brought all the world to their doorstep. Speaking in foreign languages was, then, not a reversal of God's punishment at the Tower of Babel, but was a celebration of the diversity in language and culture that had been made possible by the scattering of people. Whether they had wanted to or not, people had migrated just as God had asked them to do to fill the earth. And in the process, they developed difference languages and different cultures and different ways of interacting with the earth. Those Galilean fishermen speaking in foreign tongues grabbed the attention of those visitors to Jerusalem as nothing else could have. God's timing is perfect! He put the right people in the right place at the right time.

So, we know the events of Pentecost, but do we know the real meaning of it? It's a powerful story and obviously the arrival of the Holy Spirit was quite dramatic and breathtaking. Nobody was going to miss this event. But what did it signify? And what does it mean for us now?

Jesus talked to his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, while they were all gathered around the dinner table for that last supper together. Jesus told them many things about what was about to happen so that when the events occurred, they would remember

what Jesus had said and they would believe. Jesus talked about leaving. He talked about the mutual indwelling with the Father: if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. And he talked about the coming of another Advocate who would be with them forever. Jesus is not going to abandon them or leave them to their own devices any more than he is going to abandon us. The world can't see this Spirit of Truth, Jesus says, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, Jesus says, because he abides with you and he will be in you!

That's a powerful description of the presence of the Holy Spirit: he will be *in* you! He's not going to leave. He will be with you always and he will be *in* you...not next to you or beside you or in the same room with you...but *in* you! Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is being sent to them...and to us...by God the Father in the name of Jesus. Jesus has not abandoned those who believe in him. Not then. And not now.

The same power of God that was indwelling with Jesus is the same power of the Holy Spirit that finds a home with all those who love Jesus and keep his commandments. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit...not our own power...that we are able to even attempt to love Jesus and to keep his commandments. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are aware of the presence of Jesus who has not left them...or us...bereft or orphaned. As Jesus ascends, the Holy Spirit enters in. And God's timing is perfect.

Jesus not only sends the Advocate to be with his followers, he also gives them his peace. The peace Jesus leaves behind is even more than the wholeness of the Jewish Shalom which is itself more than what the world offers of peace. The peace that Jesus leaves is a supernatural inner disposition of serenity. It is a peace in which the heart is not troubled. The heart may be sad at times. The heart may grieve at times. But the heart of the one that holds the peace that Jesus leaves behind...not just for his disciples, but for us as well...is an untroubled heart. The belief in Jesus Christ is expressed through loving obedience...which none of us can do without the power of the Holy Spirit. We are being invited into an intimacy with God through belief in Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God has brought all the elements together and has set the stage for us to turn our attention to the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is what dwells within us and stays with us.

No greater mystery has ever existed or ever offered so much. When we need it the most, the Holy Spirit is no farther away than our own breath because God's timing is perfect!

Thanks be to God.  
AMEN.