

Amazed, Perplexed, Bewildered

Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2

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Pentecost

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I wonder if you would permit me a personal word this morning before we dig into our text. I want to spend some time with you on the Tower of Babel story this morning.

But first, as Sam mentioned during the announcements last week, I went to the U.S. for a few days to join my family in celebrating my mother’s 90th birthday. 90th birthdays, as you know, do not come along very often, and the temptation is often to take good health and long life for granted.

But as Psalm 90 reminds us, “the days of our life are 70 years, and 80 if we are strong.”

So, when a 90th birthday comes along, it’s important to set aside time and to fly 7000 kilometers and to say thank you to God for the gift of life. Which is what my family did a week and a half (or so) ago.

As I told several of you, my mother was in rare in form the night of the birthday dinner. She drove her car to the hotel where the party was ... because it would have been inconvenient, she thought, for us to come and get her. She also made a speech during the meal, in which she told us how proud she was of each us – children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

And of course, as the son who became the pastor, it was my privilege to lead my family in a prayer of thanksgiving for my mom's life.

You are looking at a very grateful person today.

I suppose that the best transition to the sermon today is to say that there is another anniversary or milestone we are celebrating today, and as a matter of fact we are joining with the worldwide church today to celebrate Pentecost, the day that God poured out his Spirit on the church.

So, nearly 2000 years later, here we are, still living in the glow of that day, still animated by that same Spirit, still living our lives as the Spirit of God gives them meaning and purpose and direction.

It's a remarkable thing, don't you think? Never mind 90th birthdays! What about a movement that had its start in Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago and still changes lives, still brings lives to life, still has the power to turn communities and cities and entire nations upside down?

Pentecost isn't as widely known or celebrated as Christmas and Easter – according to my village newspaper, not many people even know what Pentecost is, even though there's a holiday associated with it in this country – but in some ways Pentecost belongs on the same level as Christmas and Easter.

What we celebrate today is enormously important, and I want to spend a few minutes with you this morning thinking about what all of it means.

And what I want to do is to understand Pentecost by reflecting on the Old Testament reading we heard earlier, the one about the Tower of Babel, from Genesis, chapter 11. In fact, it might be helpful to back up all the way to the first page of the Bible, Genesis chapter one, where we are told that **28 God blessed them [the first humans], and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”**

So, this was God's will for us – namely, that we would **“be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over it, and – it's important to say, especially this weekend – be stewards of the gift of creation.”**

I don't know if you've ever reflected on this – it would be interesting to do that once in a while – but God's command to the first man and first woman was not such a difficult one. Right? God said, **“I bless you. So, live your lives. Expand, grow. Enjoy this beautiful earth. It is my gift to you.”**

How difficult was that?

But – and I think you know what comes next – God’s intention for humanity did not last long. Very quickly, it was undermined. And it’s important to see – we’ll come back to this – it’s important to see that it was undermined by pride, or hubris.

The serpent who tempted Eve in the garden told her that she could be like God, which sounded pretty good to her, knowing good and evil, if only she would eat from the tree she was not supposed to eat from. So, that first sin, the original sin, was pride. Hubris.

And it is that same sin we see in the story of the Tower of Babel.

I don’t know how many of you know this story. It’s told in Sunday school classes, of course, but after that it doesn’t get much attention. And yet, a great deal happens here, a great deal we should see.

According to Genesis chapter 11, **“the whole earth had one language and the same words.”** Well, that seems odd, because in the previous chapter, chapter ten, the story tells us that after the flood, Noah’s family spread over the earth and had many languages. **“These are the descendants of Japheth,”** I’m quoting here, **“in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.”**

So, it seems odd when chapter eleven opens with this statement about “one language” for everybody.

The American pastor John Piper has reflected on these verses, and what he says about this – and I think he’s right – is that the story teller is not confused. At first glance, it may appear that way. But if you’re telling a story, you put the important information first – namely, that Noah’s descendants scattered over the whole earth – and then you fill in, you describe how things became the way they did.

So, why did people finally disperse, which is what God wanted them to do? Because, as chapter 11 explains, God had to push them to do it. God made it happen.

Chapter 11 tell us about this curious situation where people were coming together, concentrating in one place, not going out, not filling the earth. And then, as if to emphasize this clumping together, this hunkering down, we are told that the whole earth had one language.

No one knows exactly where this was place was, though some scholars and archeologists have a pretty good idea. In 610 BC, a tower was built in Babylon, or what would later become Babylon. And it doesn’t exist today because of Alexander the Great who decided to destroy it.

According to estimates, this tower was 91 meters tall or about 300 feet, not very tall by current standards, but remarkable for the time. Maybe you’ve seen the famous painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel (the elder) who tried to imagine what this tower looked like – kind of a spiral of mud and clay.

In any case, with only mud and clay to work with, they quickly reached their engineering limit on height. These were not the right materials with which to go much higher. But the motive for building, according to the story, was **“to make a name”** for themselves. This was about pride. This would be a tower, they thought, that would reach the heavens and would reflect well on them and their ingenuity and their greatness. They were making a name for themselves.

The sin of pride was serious, but it wasn't the only sin at work among these people, and I don't think I had ever seen this before. It was not until I did some reading last week that the story began to make some sense to me.

In addition to pride, or wanting to make a name for themselves, there was also apparently a great deal of fear. And I wonder if you see that? What else explains their reluctance to scatter? Why were they concentrating in one place, when God had told them to go, to fill the earth?

In the ancient near east, there were many flood stories. All of the ancient near eastern religions, including the Israelite religion, seem to have a story about a great flood, and always after the flood – this is interesting – the people who survived would gather in one place.

And the reason they did that of course was fear. Leaving home requires courage. Going out into the world can be scary. Better to stay where you know people, and where you speak the language, and where you know the customs and traditions. Leaving home for lots of people is a terrible thing to contemplate.

As I typed those words last week, it occurred to me that this congregation has mostly conquered that fear. Most of us are here because we left home or we ventured out beyond the safety of home.

So, in case you think this story is not for you, stay with me. I think God has a word for us here.

This fear of the unknown is widespread. This reluctance to hear God's command in our lives to leave the comfortable and the familiar and to go – as the story of Abraham puts it – to go to a land that I will show you, this reluctance is widespread. It is not in our nature just to walk away, when staying home and hunkering down would be so much easier.

So, what was the sin of the people who built this tower? It was pride, of course, but it was more than that. It was also fear.

And so, God decided to do something about that. God came down, something God has done more than once in human history.

Now, I can't resist pointing out to you a bit of humor in this story. We sometimes think that because it's the Bible it can't be funny. But what happens here is funny, and it is intended to be funny. John Piper, as a matter of fact, calls this "holy scorn." God is not impressed.

After the tower was built, we're told that God "came down" to have a look. That's the funny part. This tower, which was supposed to reach the heavens, wasn't very big at all. Not from God's point of view.

When you're in an airplane – at 36,000 feet or 11,000 meters – everything on the ground looks pretty small and insignificant. And that's what the biblical writer wants us to understand here. God had to "come down" and have a look. The tower was not all that impressive to the One who had created the sun, moon, and stars, and who put the planets in their orbits.

And so, at this point God does something that we usually think of as punishment. We're told that God "**confused their languages.**" And I suppose that there is an element of judgment here. God doesn't have much use for our pride and hubris. But there is something more happening here.

These people were refusing to fulfill the creation mandate, and so God's "punishment" was to encourage them, to enable them, to comply with God's initial command.

Here's a bad illustration of this: One of the items on my bucket list – this may surprise you – is to make a parachute jump. Someday it will happen. But here's the thing. I will never be able to jump out of an airplane on my own. Who does that? People who do it the first time go with an instructor. You hold on to the instructor, and he jumps out of the plane, and he remembers to pull the ripcord, and he knows how to land.

So, if I ever make a parachute jump, I will need a push. I will need to be dragged toward the door of the plane.

I think that these people in our story for today needed a push to jump out of the airplane, and God gave them the push they needed.

That's what this story tells us.

And now to the Pentecost story.

In Acts 2 we find the disciples gathered together in one place, according to the story, about a hundred and twenty of them, in one house, and it sounds to me as though they are hunkered down, they are clumped together, they are not going very far at all, except maybe venturing out to buy groceries.

On Easter morning their instruction was to "go" – remember? – go to Galilee and Jesus will meet you there, the angel said.

In Matthew's gospel, before Jesus leaves the disciples and ascends into heaven, he tells them to go into the all the world, and to make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything I have commanded you and baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

But here they are...not going anywhere. What's holding them back? Fear? The story doesn't explicitly tell us that, but what else could it be? They have a terrible case of inertia. They're stuck. Paralyzed. They can't bring themselves to leave.

And then, all of that changes – this is the miracle of Pentecost – all of that changes with the outpouring of God's Spirit.

This is not the Spirit of gentleness that we sometimes sing about, the Comforter that Jesus mentions in John's gospel. The spirit has those characteristics too. But the Spirit in this story is the disruptive Spirit. Do you see that? This is the Spirit who pushes us to do what we didn't know we could do, the Spirit who pushes us from our comfort zones and out into the world.

And of course God doesn't give them one language – no – instead God gave them many languages, multiple languages. Real languages, by the way. Actual languages that people could understand. Not a spiritual language, as some have suggested. The people on the street that day understood exactly what the disciples were talking about.

And again, the purpose was to get them moving, to get them talking, to push them into the world – with a wonderful story to tell.

I think you really can't understand Pentecost without knowing this other story from Genesis. From the beginning God's command has been to go. Our inclination is to stay home and be safe, and God has always had another idea for us.

God said to those first humans – and God says to us – go. Get moving. Why are you still here? There's a world out there, and it's a world in need. Go and teach them everything I have tried to teach you.

A couple of months ago, in my sermon series on basic Christian teaching, we took an in-depth look at the holy Spirit, and I said something about the problem of the church today.

Christians today, I said, like to gather in their beautiful churches and have lovely worship, but in many parts of the world, including the U.S., where I am from, their numbers are dwindling. And those who still gather are becoming older and older. Most of the members in the denomination I am a part of are 55 and older. Which is not a healthy trend.

And while church members continue to grow older and while their numbers become smaller, they can't figure out why they're not growing. They keep their buildings clean and well-maintained, they're so proud of what they have built, but where are those young families? Where are the millennials? An entire generation – at least in the west – an entire generation has left and not come back.

Well, maybe the Spirit's call to the church on this Pentecost 2017 is to go, to go where the young families are, to go where the millennials are. If they are not coming to us, maybe we should be going to them.

Look, instead of applying this scripture to the church today, which is somewhat impersonal, maybe I should be applying it to us as individuals.

Let me ask you: Where in your life are you stuck, and frozen, and unable to move. I wonder where in your life you have become afraid to move out, and instead have become content to hunker down and stay where you are and **“make a name for yourself.”**

You know, maybe, this story is aimed in your direction.

Maybe God is speaking to you. Maybe God is saying, **“You know, it's time for you to get moving. I will pour out my Spirit on you. I will give you the language to speak and any other gifts you need, but you need to go, scatter, fill the earth. That tower you have built for yourself, that you are so proud of...it's not as tall as you think. I know, because I came down to take a look at it.”**

Go therefore, make disciples of all nations, fill the earth, announce the good news.

Let us pray: Gracious God, on this anniversary Sunday, we celebrate the outpouring of your holy Spirit on timid and fearful disciples, and we admit – reluctantly – that after nearly 2000 years we are still timid and fearful, still afraid to go very far, always wanting the safety of the familiar. Send us out, we pray, with the boldness of Peter. Send us out with a message of good news to a hurting world. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.