

## Babel and Pentecost...Today!

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-18

May 31, 2020

Jesus had promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come, and so it did. Fifty days after Easter at the Jewish festival of Pentecost. This Sunday!

It happened amid rushing wind and “tongues as of fire” resting on their heads. The Spirit of God that moved across the face of the deep and created the heavens and the earth, that overshadowed Mary’s flesh and brought forth a child of heaven and earth, the Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism anointing him for the ministry as the Son of God in the world, *now let itself loose on the church!*

## I

As the Spirit descended upon the disciples, they found themselves speaking in new tongues. Then the Spirit swept out of the house into the streets, rushing out amid the Jews of many nations assembled in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival.

By miracle of the Spirit's presence, though they spoke many languages they now could understand what the disciples were saying. ( I prayed for such a miracle in German classes, to no avail!)

We often emphasize the miracle of Pentecost as a miracle of *speaking*, as in "speaking in tongues. It is *more!* It is a miracle of *hearing*, hearing and understanding:

“...each one *heard* them speaking in their own language (v.6)”

“...how is it that we *hear*? v.8)”

“... we *hear* them telling in their own tongues the might works of god. (v.11)”

So Pentecost is also about hearing, listening, understanding.

## II

Now let's turn to the story of Babel. Babel and Pentecost are opposite, almost archetypal, images.

In Babel we are trying to storm heaven. At Pentecost heaven comes down to us.

In Babel we see the prideful execution of human power. At Pentecost we see the outpouring of the power of the Holy Spirit on all flesh.

Babel is about the fracture of humanity and the confusion of language. Pentecost is about humanity made one again because we can hear and understand each other.

In one we want to build high towers and put our names atop. In the other God comes down to us and gives us God's own Name and Spirit.

### III

Genesis 11 begins by speaking of the original unity of all humanity, (Today the Genome Project and the study of D.N.A. say the same.) If God is One, and if we all come

from this one God, then we have an original, down deep unity. After the Flood God called humanity to scatter across the earth and re-populate it.

But we see humanity taking a different path. They herd themselves together and try to fortify themselves by building a city and a tower to the heavens:

Come now, let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered across the face of the earth.

In his monumental work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr said that the sin of pride comes from an *elemental anxiety*. We grow afraid in our finitude and try to be *more!*<sup>1</sup>

So here in this ancient story an anxious humanity builds a city and a tower—and no doubt *walls* too, all ancient cities had walls! They want to be immortal and make a name for themselves.

The origins of this story were pre-biblical, an effort to explain how the earth has so many peoples and languages. In this telling in Genesis it carries with it a spoof of Babylon. Babel/Babylon. It would turn to *babble*. It takes on the pretensions of power, the pretentious dream of empire. It mocks the Babylonian ziggurats, man-made mountains, their towers of brick reaching the heavens:

Come, let us bake bricks....and build for ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens.

Davie Napier, a marvelous preacher and teacher of a former generation spoofed the tower builders—and us—putting these words in their mouths:

All glory be to thee, O ruddy Brick,  
almighty Brick that we have made,  
O burned and burnished Brick,  
our refuge and  
our strength.

This Brick, this mighty fortress is our God,  
a bulwark never, never failing;  
our shelter from the flood  
of mortal ills  
prevailing.<sup>2</sup>

We need bricks! Bricks for towers, bricks for homes, bricks for walls to guard our homes.

Peter Brueghel, the famous Flemish painter, painted a picture of the Tower of Babel as set in a Belgian seaport town of his day.

The monstrosity of a tower dominates the whole town, casting its shadow over half the town in the morning and over the other half in the afternoon.

In the painting the tower is still under construction, and everyone of the tiny figures in town are conscripted to build it—all except the king, of course, who watches it go up...and a few figures bowing down before him.

Prominently half-way up the tower is a huge cannon.

You don't just need walls and a tower, you need a cannon too!

So what happens to Babel? God "baffles" their language, thwarts their schemes and scatters them across the earth.

This is God's judgment on empires, the big ones and the little ones we erect to protect ourselves and make ourselves great.

And look what happens: Language falls apart. Language becomes undependable. We have "alternative facts", "fake news"; and some say, "truth is relative". We use language to obfuscate and dominate, not to elucidate and communicate. Empires fall first from the inside,

with the breakdown of language, with words you can no longer count on.

As in this scene from *Alice In Wonderland*:

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is”, said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master—that’s all.”

As one has said, “knowledge is power”, so let’s figure out a way to control knowledge! But both Humpty Dumpty and Babel fall—and Babylon too!

As the Proverb says,

Pride goeth before destruction  
and a haughty spirit before a fall.

(Proverbs 16:18)

#### IV

But Pentecost! Pentecost on the other hand is the reverse image. Heaven comes down to us! Though speaking many languages, people hear and understand each other.

Yes, there was at Pentecost the miracle of *speaking*. The Spirit was poured out on all flesh, men and women, young and old, and men and women both started *preaching*. (The church is still trying to catch up.) But perhaps the greater miracle, and the one we most need today, was the miracle of *hearing*, hearing, listening and

understanding. Some Christians—and I throw no stones—pray for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. How many of us pray for the gift of the Spirit of *hearing*, hearing, listening, understanding?

We speak in so many languages today: women speak Venus and men speak Mars; there's Republican-speak and Democrat-speak; there's the language of the old and the language of the young, the language of the poor and the language of the rich. We yell across the chasms.

## V

But Pentecost comes, and God gives us the language of the Spirit, which is the language of love, and we begin to hear, listen and understand one another. To be

understood is to be loved. To love is to seek to understand.

A Benedictine monk drew for me the two Japanese pictograms for “to hear”. One was the pictogram for “to listen”; the other was the pictogram for “to listen deeply.” In the first, to listen, there was the symbol for an ear and a door, as if the hear was walking past two swinging doors and listening in for a moment while passing by. The pictogram for “to listen deeply” showed an ear, a heart and the number fourteen. *It means to listen with fourteen hearts!* What if we listened to one another with fourteen hearts? This is what the Spirit helps us do.

True listening is a sacred act. It requires a stillness of heart and mind, an inner quiet as we listen. Morton Kelsey describes the spiritual gift of listening:

The first step in listening, then is allowing oneself to be with another and to be silent with them. We are silent not only with our lips but also in our inner response. We listen to them and are silent inside. We neither agree nor disagree with what is said. We simply listen openly, permitting the other to be what he or she is. Listening is free and open and does not need to control what is heard, does not need to censor it.

This true listening is a form of prayer as we hear not only the words but the sacredness of the other and of the God dwelling in them.

I once went to see a new physician. I had not met her before but I needed that day a physician. As I talked, I could feel her listening, listening deeply, hearing not just my words, hearing *me*. I felt as if healing had already begun.

This is the healing of Pentecost, the gift of Pentecost when it comes. Will we be a Babel nation or a Pentecost nation, a Babel Church or a Pentecost Church? *Babelites* or Pentecost people? I think I know which one you want. So let us pray with Christians through the centuries, and especially on this day, “Come Holy Spirit come!”

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*,  
Vol I (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), pp. 181ff.

2. B. Davie Napier, *Come Sweet Death: A Quintet From  
Genesis* (Philadelphia: United Church Press,  
1967),pp.68-9.