

Overcoming Babel

COMMUNION-PENTECOST-VBS

June 5, 2022

Genesis 11:1-9

¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.

⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” ⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel — because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

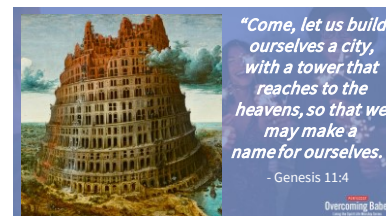


Have you ever been involved in a project that suddenly took a turn for the worse? Initially things are going well. You or your teams is making good progress. And then suddenly, things aren't going well. It is all different. The plan falls apart or some unexpected hiccup arises. Just like that, hopes are dashed. Along with that, soon relationships begin to crumble. There seems to be plenty of blame to go around. You have no idea what just happened. It was so clear and so positive. And then it wasn't. Maybe the complications of the world – pride, ego, control – maybe they got in the way. Maybe it was just someone being human that jumbled the plans, the vision – someone got a little jealous of another's attention or someone did not get things exactly their way. All of a sudden it was as if everyone started speaking a different language. One person could not understand what another person was trying to say. Meanings got crossed. Have you ever been there? As we prepare to delve into a passage where something like this happened a long time ago, let us pray...

Turn with me to Genesis 11. We are early in the Biblical account. Adam and Eve had walked and talked with God daily in the garden, dwelling in a paradise. Then sin entered the picture and God sent Adam and Eve out to till the soil, to labor for their food. This passage from Genesis 11 is a bookend to the story of the Garden of Eden. We recall that Adam and Eve were sent out to *"fill the earth."* That was God's directive to them as they were ushered out of the Garden. But in our passage today we see people choosing NOT to fulfill this command. They want to hunker down, to stay in that one place. In verses 3 and 4 they decide to make bricks and to build a city. They fear being *"scattered over on the face of the whole earth."* I wonder why they fear this. Do they fear the unknown? Well, the fear of the unknown is a great motivator.

Or do they just want safety and security? We all want these things, don't we? Maybe they are avoiding risk, trying to head off change. We do this too, don't we?

There is another aspect to the building project that was objectionable to God. The people said to one another, *"Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves."* Pride and ego began to



surface. Arrogance was in the air. Humanity had begun to change. When things have gone awry for me or for a team I was working with, these have been common culprits. Added to the fear of the unknown and to their desire for safety and security in the things of this earth, humanity was maybe drifting away from God.

To this day humanity has struggled with trusting self a bit too much. We have at times tried to rely upon ourselves instead of God. The human race has become one that loves routine, status quo, normal. As Christians, we can fall into these traps too. Sure, coming to church on Sunday morning is fine. But go out on a Tuesday night to share our faith on the street in Sturgis? Sitting at the tables in Fellowship Hall doing a Bible study together – sign me up! Going and inviting my neighbor to bring their children to VBS? No thank you. These are but a couple of the ways that we might prefer over living a risky or daring faith. I know I have been guilty of these things, of taking the easy or safe way. Maybe you are too.

In our Genesis passage, God draws near to inspect their work. And God determines that something must be done. The diagnosis: *“Nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”* This must be stopped. If not, humanity will never learn humility, will never learn to depend on one another, will maybe even come to think that God is not necessary. That is one explanation.

But what if something needed done because God realized that humanity needed to be pushed, to be extended beyond what is comfortable, to be challenged? What if God was not happy with humanity dwelling forever in the status quo, in the normal, in the comfortable in the big city with the fancy tower? What if God created us for more than to just be? My friends, I believe that God created us for more than to just sit in church once a week, for more than living stationary and safe lives.



For whatever reason, God mashes up their language and the project comes to a grinding halt. Community, connection, relationship – it all becomes disjointed. Folks thought they knew each other well. Then, all of the sudden, they realized that they didn’t know one another at all. They couldn’t even understand one another anymore. It was as if they were speaking another language. In fact, they are. We read at the end of the passage that *“the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”* The directive given to Adam and Eve earlier in Genesis is now lived out.

So, what is the point of the story of Babel? Is the story of Babel and God mixing up their languages a story of punishment? Is it a story about God being angry at humanity for making its own choices, of God humbling us before we got too big for ourselves? Or... is this God's way of helping us by providing diversity to enhance the human experience? Is this God's way of helping humanity to learn to overcome our differences so that we can find true unity?

Sometimes I've thought how nice it would be if everyone just thought like I did, if everyone saw the world as I did. Have you ever thought such a thing? Wouldn't life be so much easier?! Yes, easier, but infinitely more boring, more monotone, more, well, lifeless. So maybe God was reigning humanity in before we got so far off track that it would be impossible to leave space for God in our lives. Maybe it is important to have to work to preserve community, to require effort to understand and interact with those who are not exactly like us, to make an intentional choice towards unity. Maybe this lesson is worth more than all the towers we could ever build. Maybe it is worth more than always getting along and never venturing outside the neat little lines that we prefer. I originally typed "neat little lies" – maybe that wasn't a mistake after all... So might our response to Babel be this: "Thank you God?"

Turning to Acts 2, we can see Pentecost as the response to Babel. Pentecost has always been one of the big festivals in the church – along with Easter and Epiphany. More recently we've added Christmas. So why was Pentecost such a big deal? Why is Pentecost such a big deal?

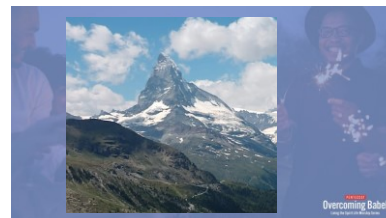
On this day when the followers of Jesus gathered, it would have been at the time of the Jewish festival of Pentecost or Shavuot. Originally this festival began as a celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Over the years, though, it had also come to be a celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. Because Shavuot was one of the three big religious festivals each year, Jews from all over the world would come to Jerusalem to celebrate and worship God. For the Christian church, Pentecost is now known as the birthday of the church.

In the opening verse we read that *“they were all together in one place.”* We assume it was for worship. And then something very much like the language confusion that happened at Babel happens. In Babel they were working along, sharing news of their families or discussing the latest ideas, and, BAM, suddenly everything changes. Each person is speaking a different language. No one can understand anyone. Confusion reigns. Imagine trying to give a firsthand account of what suddenly happened at Babel. In Jerusalem, they were gathered, singing hymns and praising God, and then, BAM, something extraordinary happens.

It was so extraordinary that Luke struggles to describe the event itself. *“A sound like...”* and *“tongues as of fire”* but not really. Sort of like wind, kind of like fire. It was an event that went beyond description, beyond experience almost. Passersby are caught up by the sound, they are drawn in by the voices and the words from back home.

These people from all over the known world who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot are stopped in their tracks. Hearing their own language in this foreign place is what makes them stop. Has this like this ever happened to you?

Hiking in the mountains of Switzerland in July 2019, below the famed mountain Jungfrau, what do I see when I look up the trail ahead of us but a family of four – mom, dad, and two girls – hiking towards us all wearing UConn Husky sweatshirts? I just had to stop and talk, had to find out when the parents graduated from my alma mater. It was just so out of the ordinary. It was unusual enough that I just had to stop and investigate this strange event.



In Acts 2, hearing people speaking in their native tongues halted them, made them curious. In Babel, it drove them apart. In Acts 2, it draws them together. These Jews from all over the world, they leaned in and tuned their ears into the conversations. They listened more carefully to the words being spoken. We have all been someplace and run into someone from home, into something that reminded us of home. We long for that connection, for that sense of the familiar – like seeing the family with the UConn sweatshirts. That is what these Medes and Persians and Elamites and Egyptians and all the others felt that morning. So, they stopped and soaked up a bit of home for a time. Most wondered about what they heard that morning. A few, for them it was maybe too much, and they scoffed, they tried to dismiss it – *“They have had too much wine.”* Peter uses the *“It’s only 9 am”* excuse to dismiss this wild accusation.



Continuing on, starting in verse 16, Peter connects to another familiar place for these God-fearing Jews. Quoting from the book of Joel, Peter says, *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”* That blowing wind, those tongues of fire – this is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that God spoke of long ago. This first Pentecost, in our Christian tradition, is just the beginning. Joel’s prophecy continues, speaking of how God will *“show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below.”*

To these God-fearing Jews, for Peter it was like asking these questions: Did you hear that mighty rushing wind that drew you to this place? And now, do you hear these Galileans speaking the word of God in your native tongue? And then, in verse 21, the prophet says, *“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* As Peter’s sermon continues, hearts will be moved that morning. We read later in Acts 2 that 3,000 people joined their number that day.

These tongues, this visible manifestation of God, this sign of an invisible presence, it made connections with people from all over the known world. These tongues of fire, one settling on each believer, they were meant to be shared. They were meant to build community and connection, to bring unity. The diversity, as beautiful as it must have sounded that day, was used to overcome differences, to connect people together. The Spirit reversed what happened long ago at Babel. Through the power of the Spirit, God drew a very diverse group of people together into the one family of God.

That first Pentecost, it was quite a diverse crowd. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, and Arabs. There were residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Cyrene, and Rome. When we consider who might make up our list today, those who we could share the good news of Jesus Christ with, wouldn't it be just as diverse of a list? We could seek to make disciples of those who are poor, homeless, addicts, single parents, elderly, teens. We could seek to share the gospel with those from Piedmont, Summerset, Sturgis, Black Hawk, Rapid City. We could share the love of Jesus with all sorts of people.

As we consider sharing our faith with such a diverse crowd, our question would be: How do we speak their "language"? How do we share the good news in a way that connects with the poor and the elderly and the teens as well as with those from different neighborhoods and from varied stations in life? How do we as a church speak each of these different and unique languages? We begin where it began in Acts 2, with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Next, we must be willing to be used by God and to follow the Spirit's guidance. If we are open to the work of making disciples, God will provide us with opportunities to witness.

But I, like each of you, do not naturally connect to all of the people that our church could connect to Jesus. For example, I am not a single mom. But we do have people in our church who were or are now single moms. They could speak a language that I cannot speak. This is true for each of us. Each of us have unique life experiences that allow us to "speak" to people in a language that they can understand and relate to.

From this point of common connection, we can move into sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that makes sense and that draws that person or family into relationship.

Isn't this what faith is supposed to do? Isn't faith meant to draw us towards one another and towards God? Isn't faith supposed to draw us all together in love? Yes, faith can do all of these things. It can if we allow the Spirit to guide. Yes, it can if we are open to the presence of the Spirit in our lives. Yes, it can if we are willing to step beyond the comfortable, beyond the normal. The same Spirit that came at the first Pentecost is still able to work in and through the lives of all believers.

The title of today's message is "Overcoming Babel." In Acts we see the giving of the Holy Spirit as God's primary means to overcome the division too often found in the human race. The questions for us today as followers of Jesus concerning overcoming Babel are these: How do we work past minor differences - in belief, in ethnicity, in social status, and in other things that can divide us - to find common ground rooted in the love of Christ that unites all things? And, how do we actively seek the voice and guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we can truly love all people?

Last Sunday we talked about our UMC mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. A popular slogan associated with the UMC is "Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors." To me this is a good place to begin as we seek to be rooted in Christ's love and in the Holy Spirit's power and presence as our primary means of overcoming the division we see and experience in our world.

Living with open hearts, minds, and doors we come to meet and interact with those not just like us. Doing so we will begin to build the relationships necessary to lead others to Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How can or should you be more open to experiencing those “*tongues of fire*” coming to rest upon you, leading and guiding you?
- 2) *Pray*. Prayer can open us up to hearing the voice of the Spirit. Spend some time in quiet, seeking the voice of the Spirit.
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 2:22-42. What led those in the crowd to be “cut to the heart”? How did they then respond to Peter’s invitation?