

“The Miracle of Understanding”

Gen 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

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Genesis 11:1-9: Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-21: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall

prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Please join me in prayer. The prayer is Spirit of the Living God – if you know it, please sing along with me: *Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me; Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me; Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

Daniel Iverson, a Presbyterian minister from North Carolina, wrote that hymn in 1926. Thanks be to God, for his ability to communicate so clearly the desire to be filled anew with the Holy Spirit, and to be open to the miracles that may come from that. The hymn expresses the willingness to be prepared for the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, a desire to clear and cleanse, remove inhibitions, fears, anxieties, anything standing in the way of being used by God. It is at the same time a letting go, an acceptance, an offering. It is an offering because we are letting go of our plans, and letting God take over.

In the Old Testament passage read today, the Tower of Babel, the people are focused on their plans -- they want to make a name for themselves by building a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens. In the beginning of the passage, there is one language in all the earth. The people decide that building a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens will not only make a name for themselves but also avoid them being scattered over the face of the earth, even though this had been stated as God's intention a couple of chapters back. Have you heard the phrase, "If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans?" The Lord comes down to see the city and the tower, and says, "Hey, look! They are one people with one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Let us go down and confuse their language there, so they will not understand each other's speech."

Traditionally, God's response has been interpreted as punishment from God for human pride. God in this context may seem like a cruel God – a God that is petty, jealous, defensive and worried about humanity's power. What if we were to, instead, view it as the response of a creative God? A God concerned about humanity's well being? A God who is good in mysterious ways? Rather than a punishment, perhaps God was noticing the need for cultural diversity, and offering a challenge to humanity. In the punishment model, cultural difference is devalued and seen as a source of confusion and a curse upon the human race. Perhaps the consequences of the Tower of Babel were a gift from God, rather than a punishment. God presented a challenge to humanity by confusing their one language into many. People had to work a little harder to understand one another. Isn't it through our challenges that we are led to some of our deepest and most valuable life experiences?

My first best friend was deaf. We forged such a deep connection by communicating through lip reading and later sign language. She had to work extra hard to understand me, and I, to be understood. When our families relocated and we lived across the country from one another, we used to imagine a phone that would allow us to see each other. Well, we plan to talk at 1pm today, through Facetime on our phones, which is free.

In the New Testament passage read today from Acts, some 2,500 or so years later than the events at the Tower of Babel, the people are again in the midst of a challenge. Their Savior has been crucified, raised from the dead, returned to walk with them and taught them for 40 days, and instructed them not to leave Jerusalem. He says that the gift of the Holy Spirit will come upon them, and from this form of baptism, they will receive power and become his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Then he ascends into heaven. They wait 10 days in Jerusalem, and this is where our Acts 2 passage begins.

The Holy Spirit indeed shows up as violent wind and tongues of fire resting on each person present in the gathering. Those gathered were the disciples and perhaps some 120 or so believers. The Message translation of the passage that says “the Holy Spirit spread like wildfire among them.”

At the very same time as this gathering of disciples of Jesus Christ, devout Jews were gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, also known as Pentecost, the thanksgiving for harvested crops, celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was an international crowd of immigrant people, who apparently heard the violent wind and a strange cacophony of all the languages of the earth being spoken at once, and they followed the sounds to see what had transpired. And what happened is this: the believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, began speaking the gospel in foreign languages, the native languages of all those devout Jews, who had come, unexpectedly, to hear. Some heard and became believers themselves. Others were skeptical and mocked the Galileans, saying they must be drunk.

Peter, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, addresses the mockers, citing the prophet Joel, who predicted this day, the day when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all people. The devout Jews would have been familiar with this Scripture. Since some hadn't responded to hearing in their native tongue, Peter was trying another angle with which to encourage their understanding. This is the Holy Spirit at work, moving, propelling, uniting, encouraging communication, connecting us to each other. This is the gift given on what is known as the birth of the Church, when some 3,000 people joined the faith in Jesus Christ that very day: the miracle that the gospel was spread in all the languages of the earth, for all people to hear and understand. When Jesus told the disciples they would spread the good news to the ends of the earth, they didn't know how this would be possible. And yet, here in Jerusalem, people from all the earth were gathered in one place, and the word was communicated to each.

We celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost because it gives a picture of what is possible when people truly connect with one another. So often, we don't know how to communicate with one another. We don't know what to say, or how to say it.

The challenge of speaking to those who do not speak our language is that we must open ourselves to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, as those foreign language speakers did that day, and also to find our common ground, as Peter did with the ridiculers, citing a passage with which they were familiar.

Who are the people in our communities, in our midst, who need to hear the good news in their own language? Who are the people in isolation, in need of the comfort of their native tongue?

There was an article recently in the *Marin IJ*, entitled, "Songs can help people with dementia reconnect and relieve anxiety." "It happens all the time," the article begins. "You can't recall the lyrics to a familiar song until you hear the music. Then the words come flowing back, as if you'd never forgotten.

This phenomenon is at the heart of a new program at Southminster retirement community in Charlotte, North Carolina, that uses personally meaningful music to improve the quality of life for people whose memories are fading.

It's working for John Robison, who suffers from dementia and has trouble with short-term memory. When he dons the ear-phones to his iPod or attends the music groups where old songs are sung, his foot starts tapping and his eyes light up in recognition of songs by the Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole.

Robison's wife loves watching her husband get pleasure from the music. "It's so important for people with prolonged memory problems to be able to relate to something in the world that they can still enjoy," she says. "Every connection you can make is rewarding for the family."

Southminster uses the Music & Memory program, which is the subject of a documentary called "Alive Inside," about how music therapy can ease the suffering of people with Alzheimer's disease.

The idea is that songs associated with important personal events can trigger memory for people with dementia, Parkinson's disease and other diseases that damage brain chemistry. Calming music can enable the listener to focus and regain a connection to others. And ideally, it can also help replace or reduce the use of medicines for anxiety and depression.

Our Deacons at this church have a music ministry, where they gather and go to visit members of the church who are home-bound. They sing familiar songs from the church as a way of sharing the good news in a common language. I have been blessed to share in some of these visits. I'll never forget the outing to Marian Judd's home. Marian had been in and out of the hospital many times before the visit. After

an hour or so of singing together from the hymnal with guitar accompaniment, her daughter said, "Mom, do you want to stop, you must be exhausted!" "Oh, no," Marian replied, "Let's sing #634!" and so we continued on. Marian died two days later, and we say the Deacons sang her straight into heaven. This was a modern-day moment of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out afresh and anew on the gathering of believers, and though there may not have been a conversion, I know there was a deepening of the faith, a strong bond of connection, and a miracle of understanding.

We celebrate today the Pentecost that happened more than two millennia ago, when the Spirit was poured out, amazing things happened, and people came to faith. What might our next Pentecost look like? How might we, empowered by the Holy Spirit, respond in faith to the summons issued by God through the needs of neighbor and community?

Can we trust that the Spirit of the Living God made manifest long ago through wind and flame and speaking in foreign tongues still speaks to us and through us today? We have been given the gift. We just need to claim it.

Let us lose ourselves and surrender ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit of God, as we sing together a new hymn #285, *Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song*.