

May 23, 2010

Genesis 11:1-9

1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

3 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.

4 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."

5 The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 6 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. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 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.

+ + +

And now it's time for a quick review.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one many believed to be the Savior was dead. After much upheaval and excitement in and around Jerusalem, for a couple of days anyway, there was calm. Then directly after the Sabbath, the rumor began to circulate that Jesus wasn't dead at all, but that he had risen from death. Over the next several days and weeks, more rumors began to spread that he had actually been seen; that he had spoken to his disciples.

After awhile there were no new stories and when asked what had happened? Why no new stories? The disciples replied that he had risen, bodily ascended into the sky which is where everybody believed that heaven was. Ten days later there was a festival in Jerusalem called Pentecost which is the Greek word for fifty (because the celebration occurred fifty days after the Passover).

This was an agricultural festival celebrating a successful early harvest, or in the language of the King James Version, "the first fruits". Apparently people were always looking for a reason to travel to Jerusalem and in those days a pilgrimage was the best people could come up with, so the city was swollen with people from distant lands who had come to celebrate the first harvest of the year.

They gathered at the Temple where, because they were from different countries and regions and were not well educated, they didn't speak Latin and they didn't speak Greek and their Hebrew was pretty rusty but something happened and the babble, the confusion of different languages being spoken was replaced by a common understanding. Then there was the wind and the fire, followed by accusations of drunkenness, and Peter got up and began to explain it all to them.

So according to this, it seems that the idea of speaking in other tongues was not born on the day of Pentecost. And further that the day of Pentecost healed the scattering curse of other languages that God had visited on the people who had been united under one language and one culture and desired to build a tower that reached the heavens.

And further still, that the thing we might most desire to celebrate on this special day of the church year is the *re-establishment of unity* that brings us together on the same road traveling toward the same end. We are companions traveling toward a place best defined as *the desire to please God*. We are no longer in this to make a name for ourselves, but to diminish ourselves in service to God remembering that Jesus taught that, “many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

The story of the building of the tower and more importantly the reason behind it has proved to be a cautionary tale from that day until this. I should warn you that there is a sort of hopelessness about it though. We have heard this story many times. Those who came before us heard it many times, as well as those who came before them. Count the centuries backward until it dissolves into a time of uncertainty maybe a thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

From that day until this the story has been told or read millions of times and while we pause at the end and wonder why we “get it” and they didn’t, only to learn a day or a month or years later, that we didn’t get it either, or worse, that we did understand it but did nothing about it.

Of course we are not helped by our statement of purpose earlier about *re-establishing unity* and traveling toward the place best defined as *the desire to please God*. What does any of that mean, after all? More importantly, what does it mean to you or me? It sounds like a lot of theological window treatments that are designed to look good, even stylish, but has no apparent purpose apart from making the room look better.

We have been soaked by and saturated in prejudice. And when I say we, obviously I include myself. But I’ve gotten so bad that I can’t offer a criticism, no matter how justified, at someone who is different from me whether because of race or gender or religion or sexual orientation without thinking that I am racist, sexist, bigoted, or homophobic. And I don’t know how we go about wringing that prejudice out of us since we’ve been soaking in it for so long.

I guess we have to want to.

If there is any truth to the story of Pentecost, it occurs to me that after scattering the people by languages as a judgment upon human pride and arrogance; then in Jesus Christ, God became willing to reverse that judgment and bring us back together once again.

Pentecost then, is no mere birthday of the church (talk about arrogance!) but the rebirth of human kind. Pentecost isn’t about babbling about the Tower of Babel; Pentecost is all

about the second chance, another golden opportunity, no, that's wrong-- for the opportunity is far more valuable than gold. But now Pentecost is spun round again as it does each year, and each year its largely neglected-- apart from the phenomenon of understanding other languages without the benefit of Berlitz or Rosetta Stone or even a language lab.

It's not fair for me to say that we don't want to take advantage of the opportunity. Maybe it's fairer to say *we don't know how* to take advantage of this eternal second chance. Things are always getting in the way of our best efforts. We chalk it up to the job, the responsibilities, no time, to the devil or to sin. But once upon a time some people came together in the land of Shinar with a common will and purposed to construct a tower, "*with its top in the heavens.*" That will was survival and identity. *For didn't they say, "let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."*

From that time until this, we have constructed buildings that dwarf any tower that the ancients could have constructed; why we have even stolen the fire from the heavens and created incredible weapons. We have pent up mighty rivers behind dams; we have processed ocean water to make it fit to drink. We fly through the air at supersonic speed. There are so many things we can do, and we have made a name for ourselves such that the ancients' jaws would drop in amazement, and everything seems to be developing at such a much faster rate. Sometimes in reflecting in the technology that has happened since I was ordained-- I still remember the joy I felt when my first mimeograph machine was delivered to the little church in Alaska I was serving, in 1976. We couldn't afford to buy one, so one of the reasons I became stated clerk of the Presbytery of Alaska was so that the presbytery would pay for it! Things sure have changed since then.

We have made a name for ourselves, but what is the name we have made for ourselves? I'm pretty sensitive about name calling maybe because I've been called a lot of names.

By making a name for ourselves I wonder what that name is? What is the name we will be called when we find ourselves re-established in unity, on a pilgrimage of our own-- traveling through time, walking the days as companions wishing to please God. And how do we get there?

Some quick thoughts about that: You know the song that goes, "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." You know I don't care if peace begins with me or not, just so it begins with somebody. I don't have to be the engine that pulls the train, just let me hook on somewhere. But the point is that *it must start somewhere*, why not you or me? Suppose we all thought that peace began with you, or me? How might we see each other differently if we thought about the possibility that it might be you or you or you, or even me. How would we treat each other? How much more would we look forward to this journey together as companions in the quest to please God.

And if that isn't tough enough, getting past all of that false modesty; getting past the fear that if it is me, there's going to be a price and I don't know if I am willing to pay that price.

We have known people who have paid that price and the temptation is to say, "No thank you." If only the peace that began with you or me could enable that peace to dwell within us.

Pentecost reminds us that none of this is beyond us. Pentecost reminds us that we have another chance; it is the beauty of our faith and belief since we are taught that God does not run out of patience with us, but provides yet another opportunity and another chance with the view that we have learned from our mistakes-- make fewer mistakes this time, lean toward perfection, take the next step-- and may it be together, and may God truly be pleased.

Amen