

## **Still Babbling After All These Years**

*Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21*

Although this morning's readings might seem a little strange at first glance - a little beyond our ordinary experience, I think there is something about the stories with which we can all identify: **The experience of being dazed and confused.** Things happen to us in life that catch us totally by surprise and leave us bewildered and unsure how to proceed; things that completely mess with our plans, our expectations, and our sense of what is possible. When something like this happens, you need time to regroup and to figure out - hopefully in a prayerful way - what to do next. If you've lost your job, or lost a relationship, or had a change in your health, you've been there: Dazed and confused.

The people in our Bible readings were also dazed and confused by some unexpected circumstances. The Old Testament lesson appears to be an ancient Israelite folk story designed to explain the diversity of languages and nationalities. This isn't unusual. Every ancient culture used stories to explain the mysteries of life. I know that some of us take the Bible more literally than others, but let me suggest that the literary form of this story and its theology pretty much require us to take it on a symbolic level. Think about it - would the God of all creation really feel threatened by people building a tower out of bricks? You'd think the building of the Empire State Building or the Petronas Towers would have merited a stronger response. But in spite of the folklore-like quality of the story, the insight behind it is important: Humanity is fractured. We are scattered and divided, literally by language and location, but also by culture, beliefs, and values. Now, as then, it's a situation that inspires confusion, frustration and even fear. It's something we've struggled with throughout all recorded history. At the same time, the story indicates that this diversity is in some fashion God's intention. Surely, it isn't because God feels threatened by human achievement, but perhaps because God has something to teach us from that diversity. That's where our New Testament reading comes into play.

There are some important things we can **learn from the story of Pentecost.** Most significantly, we see that God's plan is not that racial, cultural, philosophical or linguistic differences should perpetually divide humanity. On Pentecost, we see God acting to overcome the barriers within the human race, and between humanity and God. And yet, God does this without eliminating the diversity that God has created. We find in the story at least three things that call the broken human community together; three things that can give us unity; three things that come from God.

Whatever may divide us, there is **one Spirit** that can unite us: God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, the Spirit descends upon the disciples, miraculously giving them the ability to speak in various languages. The Bible says, *"All of them were filled with the*

*Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."* This isn't the speaking in tongues you'd encounter at a typical Pentecostal church; these are actual human languages that were understood by all the people of diverse nationalities who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. Amazingly, the linguistic and cultural divide was overcome - not by the elimination of differences, but by God enabling the disciples to speak in new ways, to new groups of people. There is one Spirit, and where the Spirit is at work, God enables us to transcend barriers of culture, language and race.

The Spirit still moves us to overcome our divisions. In our Presbytery there are people working hard to reach out to Spanish speaking individuals. We have churches that are trying to bridge the gap between different races, and between different social classes. Our own church is at least partly involved in some of these efforts through our support of the House of Bread, Dayton Urban Ministry, and the FISH Southeast Food Pantry. And in our relationships within the church we are growing more diverse. These are good things. But let me challenge us a little on this point, because I don't think we fully understand how important these things are. When the Spirit of God is flowing freely and with power among us, we will be passionate about bridging the gaps that exist in the human community. We'll move beyond seeing our acts of charity simply as ways to help people in need, and not take our diversity for granted. We in suburban churches are often content to focus on helping people like us who live in our immediate surroundings, but there is much more at stake than simply helping people - what's at stake is God's concern to work through the Spirit to restore wholeness to the human community. And so, if we don't feel too much enthusiasm for reaching out to people who are different from ourselves, if we are complacent about this, it's a sign that we are out of line with the work of the Spirit.

Note that it's not just a sentimental sort of unity the Spirit brings. The story shows that our differences are to be overcome by relying on the **one God** who created us. Notice what the One Spirit causes people to experience, *"...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."* Now you know as well as I do that far too often, our words about God - and other people's words about God - are used as tools to further division and animosity. We argue over beliefs. We fight to prove the superiority of our own way. Each of the world's religions, including our own, has served as a rationale for extremists to commit murder. This is one of the reasons that many people reject belief in God. But realize what the disciples were originally led to do. From the context of the story, we can be sure that the words they spoke about God were specifically about the God they came to know in Jesus Christ. Jesus' message of God's love for all, of God's forgiveness for sinners, of God's welcome of the outcasts, of faith based non-violence and non-retaliation, of a new quality of life, and of care for the poor - these are things that

are truly good news for everyone. The disciple's proclamation of Jesus' resurrection - that even the evil Roman Empire couldn't rob people of true life - is the best possible news. The Spirit motivated the disciples to share God's work in Jesus Christ in a way that was good news for all. This was centuries before people began arguing over doctrines like the Trinity or Incarnation; it was before Christianity was a separate religion from Judaism; it was before anyone ever thought about using Jesus as an excuse for violence or division. It was the simple announcement that in Jesus, God has overcome the powers of evil, and reconciles the world to God's self. Even if people of other faiths don't accept the later doctrinal formulations of Christianity, many times they can still see that the way of Jesus, the way he lived and taught others to live, is still the most practical way to live in community with God and with one another. And ultimately, you've got to ask - does Jesus care more about what you believe about him, or whether you actually follow him. There is a place in Scripture in which Jesus says that, in the end, many who have called him Lord will be disappointed to hear him say, "I never knew you," because they didn't bother to actually follow his teachings.

Ultimately, it comes down to this. Humanity has only **one hope**. Peter quotes scripture to say "*...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" There is no hope for humanity but in the grace of God that we experience in Jesus Christ, which is shared so abundantly through the power of the Holy Spirit working among us. The God Jesus shows us is the one who works to reconcile humanity to God, and to reconcile us to one another. The confusion of languages and cultures, the suspicion and animosity that divide neighbor from neighbor and nation from nation, are not God's ultimate will for us. Rather, it is that we should learn to reach beyond the things that divide us, sharing the way of Jesus by actually living it, and continually relying on God's grace as our one true hope.

The people who witnessed the miracle of Pentecost wondered, "**What does this mean?**" It was shocking to see the boundaries of language and culture so thoroughly shattered, and for God's grace to be offered so freely and openly. And, to the extent that we welcome the Spirit to work among us, people will look at our community of faith and ask the same thing. "What does this mean?" What is going on here, in this group of people who freely share God's love, who reach beyond the boundaries of race and culture and religion, who really live out the message of hope they proclaim?

Are we there yet? No. Not yet. But we can learn this additional lesson from the book of Acts. Prior to Pentecost, the disciples dedicated themselves to meeting together, to praying and learning and eating together. They prayerfully waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus had promised. If we, who are likewise heirs to Christ's promise, devote ourselves to prayer and community and seeking the gift of the Spirit, we will find ourselves energized and empowered and transformed. We may not literally begin

speaking in foreign languages, but we will be filled with the passion to reach beyond those things that divide humanity and separate us from the experience of God's love. And then people will look on in wonder, and they will praise God for what God is doing among us.