

“Babel Reversed – Spirit Within” a Pentecost sermon May 31, 2009  
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)

Text: Acts 2:1-20 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.

THE HOLY SPIRIT was not birthed, fully developed, newly arrived, on Pentecost Day. The Spirit was there at the beginning, when The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep; when a wind from God swept over the face of the waters... bringing order to the chaos and life to the barren creation.

The Spirit was the *ruach*, the breath of life, blown into the nostrils of Adam making the first living being.

The Spirit accompanied, the bringing of the law in Exodus with lightening and wind and brilliance. The Divine Spirit filled Moses; and at the foot of the mountain, Yahweh came down in the cloud and, took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on the 70 elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.

No the Spirit was not new on Pentecost. So intimate a part of God’s presence and power was She, that the psalmist wondered, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”

In the vision of Ezekiel we see a visceral display of the unstoppable power of the Spirit as God empowers the prophet to preach to dry, dead bones and to bring them back to life.

And in Isaiah, we find the very mission that Jesus co-opted as his own: "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the awe of the LORD."

The mystery, the sheer power, the presence of our God has been given since creation. At Pentecost, the Spirit comes again, strengthening and encouraging those who walk in God's ways. Once again, the infinite becomes intimate. The same powerful creating Spirit, the same Spirit which rescues the Motherless Child and brings back life to the most depressed or fearful, that Spirit turns the terrified, grief-stricken, confused, unsure, overwhelmed, hurt and hurting disciples into confident and joyful prophets. Here is a dramatic reminder, that no matter how down we are, no matter how hard or frightened or hurting or hopeless we feel, we are never alone, God has never abandoned us, we will always be held, renewed and ultimately empowered.

Picture a windy, spring day, when the howling gusts of wind sends even the sturdiest pigeons fluttering for cover, and a four-year-old girl asks her Mother, "Mommy, can I go out and play with the wind?" "Sure, sweetheart," her mother replies. Then she stands at the kitchen window and watches as the little girl twists and swirls in dizzying circles. She swings her arms and twirls around and around as she laughs joyously, dancing with the wind, rejoicing in the gift of life. Isn't that the way the church is supposed to feel?

So what is different at Pentecost? This time the delicious and powerful gift is channeled through the soul and spirit of Jesus Christ. This time, the Spirit through Jesus, says, it is time to overturn the curse of Babel.

Remember our first reading? The Tower of Babel is a metaphor for earthly ambition. It is the image of a world forging a unity not to embrace and empower, but to frustrate and usurp God's holy will and purpose. It is in the face of such arrogance, that God scatters the nations.

When the walls of Babel were destroyed, walls of our own making were forged, walls of ethnocentrism which enshrine our differences. When I was in Palestine I experienced the forceful enmity of a wall, the commanding, potent, visceral statement of division and hatred. For me, there is no more powerful example of how the diversity we celebrate so loudly in our own congregation can become not a blessing but a curse.

The destruction of Babel and the scattering of nations provide an explanation of humans living as parochial captives of their own languages, humans divided by the inability to hear or to be heard, to understand or to be understood. Without communication, without an effort toward understanding, nations remain caught in isolated confusions and self-righteous judgments, all fueled by fear and misunderstanding. The scattering and separation of the nations is the sad reality of the world today.

Pentecost says it does not have to be. The Spirit of Jesus takes individual charisms and creates new community. Babel may be a myth, a metaphor, but the coming of the Spirit is

no metaphor, it is an actual experience of God's grace, an outpouring of God's energy touching every life present. It was true for the disciples and it can be true for us today.

At Pentecost, diversions were overcome by a power that did not diminish the diversity of that great crowd, it transcended it. The people did not cease to be Medes, Persians and Elamites, They did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been; for somehow all understood that God was alive and active in this world and all were invited to participate in God's purposes.

Pentecost bring the gift of understanding, of hearing and being heard, across boundaries, across differences and diversities, in a universal language of passion and love. The disciples were given articulate words of passion and clarity, the right language at the right time for Spirit-inspired words to be spoken and heard - heard in the heart.

I read a commentary this week that suggested that all the sojourners crowding into Jerusalem on that day would already have spoken Hebrew or Aramaic. After all, they were Jews gathering for the ancient Jewish feast of the harvest, also called Pentecost. They might have had their own languages but they also shared the language of their faith. Did the disciples actually know how to speak multiple languages in an instant? Or might they simply have been given words and expressions that finally could be heard and believed? Walter Brueggemann points out that the events of Pentecost resulted not in a single universal language but in a "fresh capacity to listen". God did not restore a single language or one homogeneous community. Instead, God enabled the reclusive disciples to come out with words of love and truth, words of Jesus, words that spoke to diverse and scattered peoples of the earth in a new way. it was the language that the Spirit empowered for that very moment, for those very people. The Spirit also allowed those people to listen, to hear, to understand. They let down their defenses and put aside judgments and suspicions. Why, at any given moment, do things become clear that were impossible before? The Spirit of Jesus opens hearts to hear and understand.

Where are you in this story? I suggest that we are both the disciples and members of the crowds. The Holy Spirit can give us the power to speak the language of faith. She can overcome our fear and pain and struggle and embolden us to find words we did not know we had. She can send us out. But can the Holy Spirit also give us the power to listen? To learn new "languages" so we can hear the questions others ask, and then share the answer?

Communications between Christian denominations can be hard and harsh. Even more hard and harsh can be communications and understandings between different faiths -- as we are discovering in our own Abrahamic interfaith investigations. But here comes Pentecost, which says it is not only possible, it is critical. Could it be that the gift of the Holy Spirit will enable us to leave the precious walls of our Protestant sanctuaries, walls that separate us from those we don't understand, walls built on a movement that began by claiming what we are not, that grew by negating others. Could it be that the gift of the Holy Spirit will lead us to ask, "What is it like to be you? What is it you need? Where are you hurting?"

In Palestine, I saw the work of the Holy Spirit allowing people to stay in situations I would have fled, for the sake of community. I saw far-sighted people creating camps for Jewish and Arab children together. I saw people braving unbelievable hardship and cruelty for the sake of the land, for the sake of family, and, for Palestinian Christians, for the sake of Jesus and his Holy Land. Returning home, I have seen the Spirit at work in the effect of the trip on each person in our group. I have seen the remarkable spread of the stories of occupied lands and the devastating effects of the Wall and the need for healing and the urgency of understanding. There is more in common than disparate in our essential humanness, there is more in common than disparate when we move to the language of listening, of curiosity, of interest and eagerness. For in those moments, the language of God, the Christ consciousness, invade our very beings, that invade and envelop the world itself.

The Spirit descended upon individuals, but *in community*: Once again we are reminded of our faith's beautiful balance between individual agency and community discernment and action. Today, the Spirit generates a courage to speak the truth as best we can. It also generates a love that envelops the very people whom we fear. The Spirit opened the disciples mouths, it opened the people's ears. May it open our hearts. AMEN