

“Outside the Gates of Eden”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 15th 2016 (Pentecost Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 11: 1-9

The first Pentecost—the event so powerfully depicted in the 2nd Chapter of Acts...a chapter which must surely be counted as one of the most crucial in all of the New Testament...

...the event depicted in the second chapter of Acts, the event now known as Pentecost, with its pouring out of the Spirit in the form of fiery tongues...

...that event, with all of its fanfare and drama, can be viewed (much like any other human event) from a number of different angles and can therefore be understood in a number of different ways. And nowhere...or so it seems to me...nowhere does that become more quickly apparent, than when we ponder the three different Old Testament passages with which our lectionary (our Sunday by Sunday list of suggested Biblical readings) pairs up the Acts 2 story.

During the first of the three year lectionary cycle, the suggested Old Testament reading for this Sunday comes from the Bible's fourth book: Numbers. It's a Moses story: a story about how the Spirit worked through Moses and through a small band of leaders working cooperatively with Moses, thereby providing a fascinating counterpoint to the Acts 2 story in which the Holy Spirit descended not only upon a small group of chosen leaders, but upon the entire gathered Church...with no exceptions whatsoever!. That's year One in our three year cycle of readings!!

In year two, the angle of vision is different. In year two the Old Testament counterpoint comes from Ezekiel: probably the most famous passage in Ezekiel, the one in which the prophet preaches to the dry bones (them bones, them bones, them dry bones!), bones which eventually come to life. Here the emphasis is not so much on the question of how the Holy Spirit empowers God's people for leadership, but on the even more basic question of how the Holy Spirit brings the dead to life, much as the Spirit brought those dry bones to life! That's year Two in our cycle of readings.

This, of course, is year three: and here we move from matters of the Spirit and leadership, from matters of life and death, and focus instead on the fact that the Holy Spirit—descending upon the disciples in the form of cloven tongues—thereby, at least in some sense, can be seen as reversing the curse that falls upon the human race at Babel: when God scatters the people by first scattering their languages, so that they can no longer comprehend one another. To come

at Pentecost through the lens provided by Babel, is to have our attention drawn—first and foremost—to the miracle through which a small group of mainly Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jews, were able to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in languages that were understood by folks from all around the Mediterranean world and even some folks from well beyond that tight knit world.

And it is important—or so I think—when we use the Tower of Babel story as the lens through which we view Pentecost....it is important to be clear that the 11th chapter of Genesis should not be read today as a quasi-scientific explanation of why there are so many different human languages. Think back...think back to last summer, when we spent nearly 10 weeks focused upon the creation story found in the first chapter of Genesis. We read that story best when we received it not as a scientific theory that needed to be placed side by side with what scientists now tell us about the creation of the cosmos, but that it was best regarded as a profound meditation on the ordered cosmos of which we are members, and of the relationship between the creation and its Creator. In much the same way, the 11th chapter of Genesis ought not to be heard as a competing theory to those offered by linguists and anthropologists when they study the development of human language. No! Here again we are being offered a profound meditation upon the relationship of God and humanity...focusing on the extent to which the gulf that already separates one human being from another in the opening chapters of Genesis, experiences a deepening as one language group is divided from another.

And it's worth noting: worth noting that the story of Babel is the final story—the climactic story—in the first section of Genesis. Like the stories that precede it, Babel deals with life “outside the gates of Eden”. After the Fall! After the murder of Abel at the hands of his brother! After violence has spread throughout the human family! After God has attempted to begin again with a man named Noah! And finally, just prior to God taking a new direction: not giving up, but deciding to work with one small tribe (a tribe headed up by a man named Abram and a woman named Sarai). The story of Babel is positioned just ahead of that dramatic turn in the narrative. And the important thing—or so it seems to me—the important thing about God's decision at Babel, God's decision to scatter human language, is that it ought to be regarded not so much as a punishment, but as a safe-guard. Think about it!

God comes down to have a look around...in effect asking the perennial question: “What in the world are they up to now?” No sooner is the question asked, then the discovery made that “they” are building a tower into heaven: taking the law, so to speak, into their own hands. I rather doubt any of that is a threat to God. On the contrary, one hunches that the damage we human beings might thereby do, would tend to be of the self-inflicted variety. And so the one language human beings are said to have shared up till then is turned into a bewildering variety of languages, such that the folks at Babel can no longer

comprehend one another. So much for the first attempt—though certainly not the last attempt—at building the Trump Tower! Incidentally!

Please note in passing that unity among human beings is a quality that God does not necessarily rate as highly as we tend to rate it. It all depends on the goal such unity has set for itself. Sometimes a unified humanity is a glorious thing to behold; sometimes a unified humanity is a terrifying thing to behold: also known as a mob. As the story of Babel makes clear, God assesses human unity on a case by case basis: and in the case of Babel, God's verdict was a decided "thanks, chaps, but no thanks."

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It's worth pondering...worth pondering how it is the case—and the extent to which it is the case—that Pentecost reverses the verdict rendered at Babel.

Consider first...consider first what does **not** happen at Pentecost. What does **not** happen at Pentecost, is God waving a magic wand and simply reversing the consequences of Babel, thereby eliminating the linguistic diversity that came into effect at that ill-fated Tower! As Henry Higgins might explain: "Norwegians still learn Norwegian...the Greeks are still taught their Greek...Arabians still learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning...and Hebrews still learn it backwards which is absolutely frightening". All of which leads me to two conclusions: the first being...

...well, the first being that God does delight in variety...delights in diversity (if you'll excuse that horrifically politically correct term!) It seems clear to me that the Biblical witness presents God as being not at all distressed by the fact that there are countless languages scattered across earth's contours, nor that each of these languages has managed to create cultures of stunning diversity. Notice, however, notice that God—unlike many of our own diversity advocates—does not give a blank check to each and every aspect of each and every diverse culture. Rather, what God does at Pentecost is reach into each language—reach into each of these diverse cultures—and bring forth the capacity for those languages and cultures not only to share the Gospel story, but to delight in the Good News of what God has done, is still doing, and has promised still to do in and through the risen Christ! Whatever else we learn at Pentecost, we learn that God is eagerly seeking to embrace—eagerly seeking to bring salvation—to every race and clan and tribe. Praise and glory be!

That having been said!

Well: that having been said...the fact that even at Pentecost there remains so much human **non**-comprehension...

...the very fact that some of the bystanders to the event assumed that the “speakers-in-foreign-tongues” were actually drunk, serves as pretty good evidence of just how stubborn human non-comprehension can be, even in the face of a miracle...

...the fact that even at Pentecost—and even some 2000 years after Pentecost—there remains so much non-comprehension between race and clan and tribe, between culture, class and civilization: all that serves as a pretty stark reminder that the miracle of Pentecost represents only a beginning...a starting point...a crucial step but still only one step...in the work of hope and healing that is God’s distinctive calling card in our midst. God is patient...in the hope that we will get on board! God is open-armed...in the expectation that we will welcome the winds of the Spirit when they seek to quicken not only our tongues but to unleash our hearts and hands. And yes: God...knowing full well that we remain, Pentecost notwithstanding, outside the gates of Eden...God is compassionate with us...

...hoping...sometimes hoping against all the evidence to the contrary...that we, in turn...will learn to be patient and open-armed and yes, above all, compassionate with one another! Compassionate: as a Spirit-filled people who know only too well our own lingering brokenness. Compassionate: as a broken and yearning people, who know full well (our brokenness notwithstanding) that God is here...that God is now...that God’s gifts are freely offered and that Pentecost is truly at hand!

Please pray with me!

*Almighty and ever-living God,
who fulfilled the promises of Easter
by sending us your Holy Spirit
and opening to every race and nation
the way of life eternal:
keep us in the unity of your Spirit,
that every tongue may tell of your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen!ⁱ*

ⁱ Courtesy of the Canadian Anglican Church’s Book of Alternative Services, Collect for Pentecost Sunday.