

Come Holy Spirit

The story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is really quite fascinating, as long as we recognize that the story is creating an imaginary world for us, in order to convey to us certain spiritual truths. It's not as helpful when it's taken literally. (You've already heard a version of it in the children's story, but let me give you an adult version.)

The narrator sets the stage of this strange world in the very first verse: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." The whole human world had a single culture, we might say. It was completely without diversity. There were only "people like us." No one was "different." No one required effort to understand. Everyone was the same. And the inhabitants of this strange world thought that it was a wonderful world indeed. They wouldn't change a thing.

But a fear crept in. They thought: *"If we don't stay very close together, if anyone wanders away from the horde, they might become 'different.' They might become 'other' than we are. They might start to think differently, speak differently, act differently, have different sorts of experiences, and so on. And that would be terrible because, then, they couldn't be trusted. They could threaten our whole way of life."*

So they were all "of one mind." And they decided to build the first City -- their own self-contained environment -- where everyone would just.... **stay put..... forever.....** so that they would **always** be very close, and no one would **ever** become different.

And to celebrate their freedom from the dangers of diversity, they decided to build a **Tower** in the center of the city -- a Monument to themselves -- that would reach right up into the clouds (even higher than Trump Tower!) Then -- with their City and its Tower -- they would have, in their words, "made a name for themselves." They would always be famous and never become obscure.

So that is what they did. And when it was finished, they were very proud of themselves -- not just because of the construction itself -- but because it showed that they had "become wise." All by themselves -- without divine aid or counsel -- they had figured out the formula for creating a **Community In Unity**. And their formula was very simple -- all they had to do was to rigorously defend themselves against *any possibility of diversity*.

But, as it turned out, their "new world" was not sustainable.... because, in the manner typical of ancient Jewish stories, God "comes down" from the heavens to check up on how creation was doing. And God is not pleased with how humanity has created their little "Community in Unity."

We can't help but think that if only they had taken the time to notice the **rest** of creation around them -- as our Psalmist did this morning -- they would have realized that God is quite fond of diversity! But they didn't.

And so, to bring his story to an abrupt end that prevents disaster, the storyteller uses an ancient literary device, where God gets "triggered into action" by the disordered scene on earth, and in one fell swoop, thwarts their plan.

"Let us go down and confuse their language," God says, *"so they will not understand one another. And let us scatter them abroad over the face of the earth."* And that did the trick. They were no longer **a false "community in unity."** They discovered their real diversity, and had to begin the real work of understanding one another.

Our second story this morning, the story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21), is also quite fascinating. And, like the story of Babel, it also requires us to move beyond a concrete, literal way of thinking and use our imaginations, so that we can understand the spiritual truths that God is seeking to convey to us.

In many ways the story of Pentecost is a **reversal** of the story of Babel. Think about it:

Like Babel, there was a great crowd. But unlike Babel, in **this** crowd, there was great diversity. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Asians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans, Arabs. (And those are just the ones I can more-or-less pronounce!) It was a regular United Nations.

Unlike Babel, God does not "come down" as the **Lone, occasionally visiting Patriarch** to break up dysfunctional parties on earth. In Pentecost, God is already here, ready and waiting to enter our lives.

Unlike Babel, God is not sending **confusion** in the midst of a "forced sameness," but inspiring **mutual understanding** in the midst of diversity.

Unlike Babel, horizons are not constricting to keep out "outsiders." Horizons are expanding to include those who are different.

But **why** is all of this happening, and why is it happening **now**?

A new understanding of God is emerging. God is revealing God's own nature as not only **One**, but as **One-within-Diversity**; as **Trinity**. As Father, and Son, and Spirit. Here to foster our growth into their Image and Likeness -- into a **true, diverse, Community in Unity**. The spiritual life is now being revealed as an active, conscious, loving participation in the Divine Life of the Trinity.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'll explore all of this more next week on Trinity Sunday.

For now, let's focus on the Spirit.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.... the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

The message here may be much simpler than we often think.

The role of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to make the Mystery of God **intelligible** to us in our day to day life experiences. Where the Mystery of God is **unintelligible**, the Spirit creates **intelligibility**.

When I go to the market to buy tomatoes, where is God in that? When I stub my toe, or contract an illness, where is God in that? When I cannot rid myself of some fear, no matter how hard I try, where is God in that? When someone reaches out to me, accepts me, and listens to me deeply in a time of distress, where is God in that? When I get into a conflict with my neighbor and all I can feel is anger, where is God in that? When I watch the 6:00 o'clock news, and hear the nations roar against one another, where is God in that?

It is very humbling to recognize, and even more humbling to accept, that -- on our own -- we cannot come up with really good answers to spiritual questions. To recognize and accept that, on our own, the Mystery of God is really not **intelligible** to us in our day-to-day life experiences, even if we are very, very smart and very good at speculating. It is within this humility -- (if, through God's Love, we can bear to accept it) -- that our hearts and minds become **open** to being "**filled** with the Holy Spirit." **Filled** with the Spirit's **understanding** of how God is at work in our lives and in our world. **Filled** with the Spirit's **sense of coherence** -- when all around us, and even within us, seems to be only Babel.

The Spirit of Truth is our Counsellor, our Teacher, our Advocate and Guide. The Spirit works in our minds and hearts to lead us to the **truth** of what is actually happening here-and-now in our own lives and in our world. "Inner peace" is the **fruit** of this. The Spirit does not simply "candy coat" our chaos with a vague sense of calm. The Spirit brings divine order into disorder, brings our hearts and minds into harmony, into co-operation, with the Divine. It is within this spiritual harmony that we come to experience an *ease of being*. The Peace that surpasses our **own** understanding, but not the Spirit's.

The real miracle of Pentecost is that the Church becomes **able to speak intelligibly** about where God is **at** in the many situations that make up people's daily lives. This is the Holy Spirit at work. It is true that the Spirit does not do this in isolation from sacred scripture and tradition, but there is a vast difference between simply **knowing the words** of wisdom and having them become truly intelligible in the context of our real life experiences.

You may have laughed or giggled to yourself when I suggested that real **miracle** of Pentecost is that the Church became able to speak intelligibly about God. I'm afraid it's true that we are no longer known as a true "Community In Unity" that can speak intelligibly about God in our context. This should humble us. I pray that it does, and that from that humble place we will cry out, "Come, Holy Spirit. Come." And the Spirit will come.

Thanks be to God.