

The Day of Pentecost  
May 19, 2013

Genesis 11:1-9  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37b  
Acts 2:1-21  
JOHN 14:8-17, 25-27

## **GOD IS A NATIVE SPEAKER OF EVERY LANGUAGE**

Without Pentecost, none of us would be Christians. Indeed without Pentecost, the Christian faith, if it existed at all, would be merely a tiny, obscure Jewish splinter group in the Holy Land like the Samaritans (who still exist), but known outside their own ranks only to scholars. More likely, without Pentecost what we call the Christian faith would never have survived the First Century or even created any written documents such as what we call the New Testament.

And God only knows what we and a billion of our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ would now believe in, or how much the history of the world would have been profoundly different and worse, and how many individual lives would not have been transformed for the better by a living relationship with the one true God.

Christmas was a vital new part of God's plan for the salvation of the world, but the meaning of Christmas is only understandable through Good Friday and Easter. If Christ had not died on the cross to take away the sin of the world and been raised from the dead on the third day to offer new life to all who believe in him, his birthday would not matter more than yours or mine and would not be a holiday. Only because we know about Good Friday and Easter do we know how important Christmas is, and therefore we celebrate.

If it were not for Pentecost, Easter would only be known to those who experienced the risen Christ first hand or who told someone else personally, for on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down on the 120 Palestinian Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah and both *empowered* and *directed* them to reach out to *all* nations with the life-saving, life-changing message of Jesus Christ.

Let's go into this more deeply, starting with the "back story", Genesis Chapter 11. Chapters 1-11 of Genesis are a powerful and poetic pre-history of the world which offers the Bible's answers to some important questions like these: "Who or what is the ultimate power and authority in the world?" "If this ultimate power and authority is one supreme and benevolent God who invites people to turn to God with faith and love, why is the

world beset by so many problems?” “If God’s love for humanity is manifested in part by giving us freedom, including freedom to rebel against God and oppress each other, how has this played out -- and where does that leave us now?”

The opening chapters of Genesis speak of all of humanity as a unity, and all of humanity having an opportunity to respond to the commandments of God, which included for people to spread over all the earth as God’s stewards of Creation. Our first reading this morning tells of humanity instead using its primeval unity *to unite in disobedience to God*: to concentrate in a city and not spread over all the earth, to build “a tower with its top in the heavens” which God never commanded (the Tower of Babel), and “to make a name for ourselves” instead of accepting their relationship to God as the core of their identities.

God therefore “came down”, to use the passage’s anthropomorphic language, and “confused their language” so that they could no longer unite in one shared rebellious project, and God “scattered them abroad over the face of the earth” in accordance with God’s original plan. The road to salvation -- right relationship with God, with other human beings, and with the whole Creation -- would begin in the very next chapter of Genesis with the call of Abraham. But that’s a story for another day.

As some of the Christian “Patristic” writers declared 1,500 years ago, the Day of Pentecost represented in one sense *a reversal of the Tower of Babel story*: humanity’s disunity, represented by the confusion of languages, was repealed by God empowering and directing Jesus’ followers to speak in a multitude of languages “*about God’s deeds of power.*”

Unity is restored by the action of God, not by a megalomaniac dictator who wants all nations under his control and under his language -- we’ve seen *that* attempted a few times in history -- but by the Holy Spirit so that all people could hear the Good News of Christ *in their mother tongue*. It is very notable that the Holy Spirit did not empower all the people from other countries to speak Galilean Aramaic, but empowered speakers of Galilean Aramaic to speak other languages.

The story of Pentecost is *not*, therefore, divinely authorized linguistic and religious imperialism, but empowering Jesus’ willing followers to reach out to other people in *their own* languages. In contrast to Judaism and Islam, for which Hebrew and Arabic, respectively, are essential, **Christianity is a faith of translations** and Jesus is preached today in over 100 languages in every time zone on earth.

Some, at least, of those who were sent forth by the Holy Spirit have tried hard to be respectful of cultures as well as languages, incorporating ideas and traditions not in conflict with core Christian values into local expressions of the faith.

This is part of what we pledge in the Baptismal Covenant this morning, to “respect the dignity of every human being.” Cyril and Methodius, apostles to the Slavic peoples in the 9th Century and Patrick, apostle to the Irish in the 5th Century, are model missionaries in this regard.

Christ Church itself is proof of the movement of the Holy Spirit around the world, empowering and directing people to share the Good News of Jesus Christ: forgiveness of sins, divine personal guidance throughout life, a world-wide community of faith to be a part of, and hope for new life beyond this mortal life. Let’s look at the flags on the table in front of the altar, which are the flags of countries of birth of people who worship here -- and there’s room for more. Imagine how small our congregations would be at our three services today if Christ Church’s membership were limited only to those ethnic groups and nationalities represented at the founding of Christ Church in 1742!

What will Christ Church’s membership look like in 50 years? God knows. And I say that not with a shrug but with joy: God does know. That chapter has not been written yet. 2014 has not been written yet. But all of us can be willing participants in God’s plan for the world through the entire Christian Church. As it says in the Episcopal Catechism, page 855 in The Book of Common Prayer, “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” *Then* there will be peace, then there will be healing, then there will be abundance for all throughout the earth.

So the next chapter of God’s plan for salvation begins *today*, and the characters in the drama can include all of us. We are all called to be saints of God, to be made holy by the Holy Spirit who came or is about to come to us in baptism, for as Thomas Merton wrote, “A ‘holy’ person is one who is sanctified by the presence and action of God in him [or her].”

The Holy Spirit calls us to build a world of justice and true community for all the people and creatures of our earth. **God is a native speaker of every language and God calls every country “home.”** So, we as Christians should embrace our world-wide community and calling, and spread peace, justice and understanding around recklessly, reaching out to all people with respect and a willingness to listen and share.

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No more proud towers to greed which collapse on factory workers, no more “making a name for ourselves”; let us simply receive and use the identities and gifts we have been given by God who said through the prophet Joel, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh.”

What do you suppose will happen next? Stay tuned for the exciting sequel!

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