

“The Day of Pentecost: God’s Diversifying Insurrection!”

May 28, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 11, Acts 2:1-8

Genesis 11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth...

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Sermon — The Day of Pentecost: God’s Diversifying Insurrection

There are certainly a lot of divisions in our current society. We seem to have harsh and angry divisions on just about every current issue; gender, sexuality, guns, abortion, trans affirming care, drag queen story hours, the role of government in taking care of the poor and etc. the list goes on. But from the very beginning God has found joy in all the diversity what was created. On the day of Pentecost, we are again reminded however, of the immense power of God's desire for us to continue in this continuation of God’s wild diversity.

Pretty much the English language dominates the world, though not in sheer numbers of course, Mandarin covers that one. But in the areas of commerce, politics and especially popular culture; media, entertainment and fashion, English and US culture dominate.

Everyone wants learn English get ahead or to at least stay abreast of the latest fads in music and movies - or to hopefully become a more desirable immigrant to the USA one day. No matter where you go, it seems, you can run into someone who knows at least a few words of English. And of course, most of us Americans actually rely on this fact, expecting at times, that no matter where we might travel at least someone will be there to help us to find the museum, food and hopefully a bathroom in a pinch!

Meanwhile as this trend tends to only get worse, over 40 percent of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing. Languages of course are entities that are alive and in constant flux and their extinction is not new; however, the pace is unprecedented. But when a language disappears, a unique vision of the world is lost and in short, we lose a testimony of centuries of a particular kind of human experience.

On the other hand, political, economic and militaristic empires desire conformity of culture, religion and especially a lingua franca! Frankly this is because uniformity makes commerce easier as well as the exploitation of natural resources!

Now I'm guessing that the story of the Tower of Babel is likely familiar to most of us and I see it as a critique of empirical conformity. Like many stories in our Old Testament, it likely existed for thousands of years in various iterations prior to this final edition that we find in the book of Genesis. Old Testament Scholars believe this edition was finalized during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon that covered most of the 6th century BCE. Those editors would have been Jewish scholars captured and deported to Babylon's capitol by the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar II.

As Empires do, the Babylonians plundered not only the material wealth of Judah but the cream of the crop of human capital as well! Builders, artisans, scholars and much needed government bureaucrats were set off on a "long march" to Babylon so as to keep that immense empirical enterprise going! In its prime many, friend and foe alike, would have agreed with the "Lord's assessment" of Babylon we read earlier,

"Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

But how does one remain faithful to the true God when surrounded and tempted to worship such a powerful nation as Babylon? The Ziggurats of Babylon, towers seemingly reaching to the heavens would have greeted those captives as they entered Babylon. The wealth, glory, power and might of the Babylonian empire would have been most certainly an overwhelming display! But the oppressive nature of that great empire would have also stood in stark contrast to the real experience of "God's people."

In our creation story, the final draft of which also came about during that same exile, it is God who has ruled from before time began. It is God who has the power to create by fiat of breath and by his very voice. It is God who actually created a world of incredible diversity and beauty that is now supposed to be "tended" over, tenderly and lovingly by human beings who bear the very image of God. Humanity was purposefully created from the same dirt not in order to exploit through harsh domination of each other or even the rest of creation, but created to rejoice and be in wonder of all that God had so lovingly made!

Empires, on the other hand, crush, steal and oppress others as they pridefully seek to make of themselves divine objects of worship! Now as a child I somehow understood this sudden chaos of the multiplicity of languages in Babel as a curse? “God sure showed them, huh?” And yeah, I suppose, for those at or near the top in Babylon it was, I guess, maybe bad news! But the sudden multiplicity of languages, rather than a curse, should be seen as God’s insurrectionary spirit of diversity at work! It was after all, what God had originally intended in the beginning!

And what was happening in Acts chapter 2 was another dramatic confirmation of God’s diversifying insurrectionary Spirit this time turned loose, blowing powerfully through another rag tag group of folks living under the harsh empirical exploitation and cruel military occupation of another great empire in Rome.

Now church tradition holds that the disciples are still holed up in the very same room where Jesus had appeared to them following his recent execution. Considering the fact that each was now a “co-conspirator” with a recently executed political dissenter, well yeah, I guess they had a good reason for staying out of sight.

But this, my friends, was the beginning of the movement that we too claim as our heritage! A movement cowering in a darkened room, crowded together with maybe a couple dozen other folks fearing for their lives! And, I guess you could add, God had them right where he wanted them! Primed and ready for the spirit to blow the roof right off the place. (And, I hope that this doesn’t sound too arrogant, but it also sounds rather similar to another “upper room” this time in Switzerland nearly 1500 years later when a similarly small group of folks, who would later be derisively called Anabaptist, who kneeled in silence and likely some trepidation to re-baptize adults?)

But a “great wind” does tear through their safe house and flaming tongues transformed those fearful fugitives into bold public witnesses!

Biblical scholar, Ched Myers, in “Binding the Strong Man” puts it this way:

“In other words, the church was forged by a remarkable act of coming out of the closet (as gays and lesbians would say), of breaking silence (as feminists would say), and of speaking inconvenient truth to power (as nonviolent resisters would say). We might think today of Latin American Mothers of the Disappeared or Palestinian Women in Black, refusing to cower before regimes of terror as they hold public vigil on behalf of victims of political violence. This is how the church was birthed and every time we muster the courage to bear the same kind of witness in the power of the Spirit, the church is born again!” (Myers p. 31)

Later we are specifically told that “devout Jews” have come to Jerusalem from basically, “all over the world.” But one also has to wonder if they were all purely pilgrims, or perhaps, were some immigrants and others even transient hobos? This multilingual event was evidently quite extraordinary since it is repeated three times in chapter two!

But why this need to use so many languages? After all, there was already at that time, a lingua franca, called Greek, that was the official language of the eastern half of the Roman empire.

Surely someone in each group would have had the ability to translate for the rest, as often is the case these days, when foreign pilgrims in our own country seek assistance. Or is the Spirit reaching beyond Roman law, custom and the need for cultural and linguistic conformity to welcome the alien?

Could some of that “great confusion” referred to in Acts be the same as that which the architects of that tower in Empirical Babylon also experienced as God’s Spirit began leading those insurgents to begin plotting that empire’s demise from within by using languages and words that the powerful failed or refused to understand?

But the apostle Peter, in verse 14, states the heart of the matter, by condemning the very authorities of empire for murdering Jesus, in an unvarnished attack, not only on Caesar’s claim for allegiance, but to Rome’s brutal suppression of all freedom movements. Put more simply, our allegiance now is to be directed towards the one who was executed - not to the executioner and it is to the weak - not to the powerful that we are to be drawn.

Luke’s continuing story in the book of Acts, will affirm this multilingual diversifying insurgency as the Gospel of Jesus Christ did indeed move out from Jerusalem and to the “all the world! It was a message and also an alternative community that we know was quickly adopted by social outcasts - the poor, women, and slaves.

Both Pentecost and Babel, are similar and key foundational strategies to tearing down the pathological monolith of Imperial homogeneity using God’s original idea of communities of abundant diversity. As Myers’ further points out, “The gift of tongues communicates across linguistic differences without suppressing or eradication of those differences. That is what distinguishes true gospel mission from cross-and-sword conquest in the service of empire that has characterized Christendom all too often. Unity through the Spirit does not mean monoculture, but the celebration of human variety.”

Pentecost then is supposed to be a challenge to the order of things both personal and political and of behaviors both inner and external. The Spirit empowers those gathered to be “church” to “dance across the entrenched (and typically legally enforced) boundaries of gender, class, ethnicity and race.”

The church is to be a movement that embraces, as John in Revelations put it, “every tribe and language and people and nation.” This pouring out of God’s Spirit is intended to disturb and to disrupt every institution of power, by intentionally posing the question, “Who ‘belongs’ and who does not?”

From the beginning, God's people have constantly been scattered, often into a hostile world, to both being greeted as strangers by strangers, and as well needing to welcome others who were different. And this great narrative of spreading and scattering and welcoming strangers has also always been subversive to those human empire builders who would rather consolidate and centralize wealth and power through homogenous language, culture and religion as well.

"God," Myers concludes, "is always on the side of the excluded and outcast, the refugee and immigrant. The Spirit has busted out and busted up business as usual many times since Babel and Jerusalem, and she is waiting to do the same in our own time - if our tongues would but dare to loosen."

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