

Sermon: Locomotive Breath

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21**

Easter is over and today is Pentecost. Pentecost is a Jewish festival that occurred 50 days after Passover, hence the name. Christians celebrate Pentecost Sunday as the day marking the birth of the church. Every year, the lectionary pairs the Genesis story about Babel with the passage about the Holy Spirit from Acts, and they each require careful reading.

The star of the day in Acts is, of course, the Holy Spirit. Without the actions of the Spirit, there is no church, at least not in the way we understand it. But what is the Spirit and what it does has always been a mystery. The Apostle's Creed states, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' and leaves it at that. We can't possibly know exactly what we're dealing with.

Working backward, in the New Testament, God returned the Spirit to Jesus at the Resurrection and thus glorified him. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit came down to Jesus. Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with Jesus' conception through the Holy Spirit. The Gospel of John goes back to Creation, where 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,' an echo of Genesis when the Spirit, as a wind or the breath of God, moved across the face of the waters. The Word of God and God's Spirit were both involved in creation and they were together at the beginning.

And now we hear the Spirit coming into the church like a violent wind, a 'locomotive breath,' if you will, guiding the disciples toward what they should do next.

Traditionally, we call this the birth, but it might be more accurate to call it the expansion, of the church, because 'they' – the disciples – 'were all together in one place.' 'They' were already 'the church,' even if it was just a few of them. And *then* the Holy Spirit shows up and suddenly, everyone was hearing about God's deeds of power in their own language. But hearing about it didn't bring unity. Instead, it brought amazement and perplexity. Someone asked, 'What does this mean?' A new thing had happened, and it caused confusion and disdain.

What's new is that on Pentecost, God blessed every language as a means of divine revelation through the hearing of the Word. Faith and understanding come later.

Now, the Babel story is related to this, but it needs context.

On its own, all seems well: one language, common speech, the unity of people building a city instead of tearing it down. But from the Bible's point of view, we've taken a wrong turn. There would be no need for a story like this if there wasn't a problem in it somewhere.

So the Babel story follows after the Flood story, in between two extended genealogies.

The story of the Flood occupies several chapters in Genesis but the crux of it is this: 'Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence (6:11).' That was troublesome and God decided to do something about it. You know the rest.

The key to understanding today's passage is the first genealogy, which traces the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This genealogy tells us two things that are important to understanding the Babel story: more than 70 nations are called out here, and they all have their own customs, cultures, lands, and languages. So, how could it be that suddenly 'the whole earth had *one* language and the same words'?

Here's the good part:

One of Ham's sons, Cush, 'became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord.' The beginning of his kingdom was **Babel**, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of **Shinar**. From that land he went into **Assyria**, and built **Nineveh**, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city' (10:8-12).

Why did the earth need a mighty warrior at all? Notice that Babel was the beginning of Nimrod's kingdom and that he went into Assyria and built Nineveh. From the Jonah story, we know that 'Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across' (Jonah 3:3).

Here's what I think: the unity of language in the Babel story is not natural but imposed. The archaeological record tells us that it was quite common for conquerors to impose 'one speech' on the conquered as a way to assert supremacy. We also know that powerful kings and pharaohs made a name for themselves by building great cities. We can read the Flood and Babel stories together as philosophical statements about Us vs. Them. The story of the Flood is a story about freedom without order, and Babel is about order without freedom. Both are about how God restores the previous state of affairs.

Fifty years ago, next month, on July 20, we're going to celebrate Apollo 11's successful mission to the Moon and back. Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins went and did something which no one else had ever done. Armstrong and Aldrin put human footprints on the Moon. While they were doing that, Collins took a photograph of the Moon with the Earth behind it that included every person who ever lived, except for Collins.

It took an enormous amount of engineering and teamwork to make Apollo 11 happen.

Apollo 13 wasn't so lucky. On that trip, there was an explosion in an oxygen tank and then all kinds of bad things happened, to the point where the mission to land on the Moon became a mission to return the crew home safely.

When the air filtration system failed and carbon dioxide levels began to rise to dangerous levels, the crew discovered that the Lunar Module used circular CO2 scrubbers, but the spare units in the Command Module were square. Apollo 13 was the mission to the Moon that made duct tape famous, and NASA learned a valuable lesson in the unity of design and engineering.

Early last week, Bob Carr and I had a conversation about church unity, and we got to talking about what we mean when we say, 'All are welcome.' Very quickly, we were asking ourselves, 'Is everyone welcome, really?' Are there times when you have to draw the line?

We can't know for sure, but do we think that the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia were all pals when they came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost? What about Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, and Egypt? Did they all wear name tags? And did the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene get along with the parts of Libya *not* belonging to Cyrene? Did the New Yorkers ever get along with the Bostonians?

Our striving for unity with God while co-existing with the diversity of our various tribes, nations, and cultures is a fundamental human dilemma.

Seventy-five years ago, on the beaches of Normandy, Allied armies began the battle to reclaim freedom for the European continent. Many different voices worked together toward a common goal, one that led, not to the top of a tower that touched heaven, but to the reaffirmation of humanity and the defeat of evil.

God's will must have seemed pretty clear at the time: Free. Europe. It's not always that clear in the church, or anywhere. We hope for unity but not uniformity; diversity but not divisiveness. All these things are evident in today's two readings.

It could be that God wants us to both celebrate our diversity and to live as a faith community within that diversity. Maybe our diversity doesn't matter to God, who knows we are all made in God's image. Maybe what matters to God is simply our unity with God, because, in our tribal diversity, we have proven that we will always do things differently from each other.

And though we are all gathered together now, the Spirit wills that we disperse and proclaim the Good News. The Holy Spirit has, can, and will again fill the entire house. Let it not perplex us. Instead, let us live in the hope that the Spirit guides us to a common goal – building the kingdom of God here on earth.

Amen.