

**Sermon: Fill the House**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

5 June 2022

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

Easter is over. Today is Pentecost, which comes from the Greek word for *fifty*, so, fifty days after Passover; fifty days after Easter, though they don't always overlap. Pentecost started as a Jewish harvest festival that morphed into celebrating the giving of the Torah. Christians celebrate it as the day that marks the birth of the church. Traditionally, the color for the day is red, symbolizing the holy fire that appeared over the disciples' heads.

The main character 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 simply states, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' and that's that.

Through Scripture, we know that God returned the Spirit to Jesus at the Resurrection, glorifying him. We know the Spirit came down to Jesus at his baptism. The Gospel of John tells us that '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 thus together at the beginning.

And now we hear the Spirit coming into the church like a violent wind, to guide the disciples and all believers.

Traditionally, we call this the birth, or even the expansion, of the church, because the disciples 'were all together in one place.' They were already the church, even if there were just a few of them. And *then* the Holy Spirit showed up and suddenly, everyone was hearing about God's deeds of power in their own language, like diplomats at the U.N.

But hearing about it didn't bring unity or understanding. Someone asked, 'What does this mean?' A strange and new thing had happened, and it caused amazement and perplexity, confusion, and disdain. Theologian Justo González asked, 'How is it that some, instead of perceiving a miracle, see only something to mock?'<sup>1</sup> Pentecost, he said, is no miracle for them.

Because they failed to perceive the miracle of the Spirit moving among the Galileans, they refused to acknowledge the presence of the Spirit, leaving them lost in their own disbelief.

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. We can think of it as the origin story for multiple languages and cultures, an ancient explanation for how it got this way.

All seems well: one language, common speech, the focused task of people building a city. But from God's point of view, they took a wrong turn or rather, they didn't take one at all.

The Babel story follows the Flood story, with only an extended genealogy in between.

The Flood story occupies several chapters in Genesis but the reason for 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. We know the rest.

One key to understanding today's passage is in the genealogy, which traces the descendants of Noah's sons. The genealogy tells us two things that help us understand the Babel story: first, more than 70 nations are called out, 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?'

Secondly, one of Noah's grandsons, 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.' (Genesis 10:8-11a)

Why did the earth need a mighty warrior if, before the Flood, it was filled with violence?

The genealogy hints that Nimrod was just the *first* of many mighty warriors. It may be that the unity of language in the Babel story was not natural but imposed.

It's a common practice for conquerors to force one language on the conquered to assert their supremacy. Maybe dispersing the people was the best way for God to get them to build their own cultures and identities, not as a punishment, but as a liberating action.

So, if we read the Flood and Babel stories together as philosophical statements, the story of the Flood is a story about freedom without order, and Babel is about order without freedom. Both are about how God acted to right the balance.

Does anyone remember a quiet little film called *The Conversation*, starring Gene Hackman, Cindy Williams, Harrison Ford, and Robert Duval? It's the movie Francis Ford Coppola made in between the first two *Godfather* movies. Gene Hackman plays a guy who tries to right the balance.

He's a surveillance expert who has a knack for doing the job right and keeping his mouth shut about it. But everyone wants to know about his shady past. They bug him – pun intended – about how he did this job or that one, or about the real reason why he left New York City.

The story revolves around how Hackman uses several different vantage points to record pieces of a conversation between two young lovers who keep moving through a crowded plaza. Back in his workshop, he puts it all together to finally hear the entire conversation. And that's when he realizes the lovers are in danger – that they think the woman's husband – his client – is going to kill them. Hackman's character comes to a conclusion and acts upon it.

Unfortunately for him and his client, he's wrong.

Did the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia all come to the same conclusion about what was happening around them, or was their perplexity based on their own biases? What about those from Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, and Egypt? Did they only see what they wanted to see? Hear what they wanted to hear?

And did the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene even speak to those from the parts of Libya *not* belonging to Cyrene?

Unless and until we know all facets of a problem or a situation, we are prone to coming to an incomplete or even an entirely incorrect conclusion. Except we can't know everything, and so we have to learn to trust in God for guidance.

Striving for unity with God within the diversity of our various tribes, nations, and cultures is not easy.

Seventy-eight years ago tomorrow, on the beaches of Normandy, Allied armies began the battle to reclaim freedom for the European continent. Many different cultures worked together toward a common goal, one that led to the reaffirmation of humanity and the defeat of evil.

God's will must have seemed pretty clear at the time: Free Europe. We don't often know God's will with that kind of certainty. At best, we hope for unity but not uniformity, diversity but not divisiveness. Today's readings may be nothing more than cautionary tales.

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

We don't look the same, dress the same, read the same books, or like the same movies, and it doesn't matter. What matters is our love of God and love of neighbor.

And though we are all gathered together now, the Spirit wills that when we disperse, we should proclaim the Good News by how we live. And if necessary, use words.

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 build a community where once only strangers stood before.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Justo González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 2001, 37-38.