

These Best Laid Plans

Genesis 11:1-9

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My godson graduated from high school yesterday. It was wild to see because he graduated from a school in the same general circuit as the school I attended. He walked in the colors of one of my high school rivals, a place where I went to compete and talk smack about the mascot and all the other ridiculous things we pretend we only do in high school. Though a couple of decades separate us, there was enough familiarity that I could see echoes of his mother and I overlaid, our choir competitions and basketball games ghosting against this group of teenagers with their mid-walk selfies and their decorated caps.

There was enough familiarity in some of the names I heard last night—Sophia Cook, Alexander Smith, Logan Duffy, Sadie Jones. When I walked the school halls, my world was made of names like that. There were plenty of assumptions about anyone who had anything different and plenty of teachers who tripped over names without notably European roots. Our district tried very hard to be uniform, to be one color, one language, one background.

But it was absolutely magnificent to listen to my godson's graduation roll call and just how many of the names in his class would have made mine apoplectic. Jose Esteban-Carilla graduated, DeShay Ndobe graduated, Nasreen DeYama graduated, Mahmoud Enwidje graduated, and many others walked across the stage to shake hands and receive that long-awaited diploma. It was marvelous as I watched the progression of young adults to realize that the area I grew up in doesn't look anything like it did twenty years ago, that the high school from which my godson graduated was as wide as the world, that diversity wasn't a swear word but a reality. I will 100% still smack talk that school's mascot because rivalries live for a long time, but I celebrate what it has become and how it refuses to be only one strand, one language, one way anymore.

It's Pentecost; happy birthday, Church, happy day-of-getting-accused-of-day-drinking, happy day of the Spirit getting to shine Her bright Self, happy singular day of wearing red in the liturgical year. The New Testament reading for today, Acts 2, is quite the spectacle: "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."¹

In the lectionary—the three-year cycle of suggested readings to cover most of the Bible—the Acts spectacle is joined by this moment in Genesis. The Tower of Babel—a name playing on the Hebrew word for “confuse”²—is sometimes used as a cautionary tale, either that humans shouldn't work together, or that diverse languages and cultures are a punishment. Both of these interpretations have done a great deal of harm over the years of the Church. Pastor John Anderson writes, “An all-too-common interpretation of the Tower of Babel story sees it as creating a problem that the Acts 2 story must redeem. What begins at Babel with the whole earth

¹ Acts 2:2–4, NRSVue

² [Hebrew Concordance: bā·bel -- 184 Occurrences](#)

having ‘one language and the same words’ and being ‘one people’ ends in multiple languages, confusion, and scattering. The Spirit at Pentecost then reverses and undoes this, creating a return to a single understood language and restoring the oneness of humanity while the apostles are ‘all together in one place.’ Pentecost becomes the antidote to Babel.

“Such a reading...fails to recognize that at Pentecost there is no return to an original, single language; rather, everyone hears the gospel ‘in their own native language’ (Acts 2:6, 8). That is the real miracle of Pentecost: how ‘for one brief moment, we were shown how it is possible to hear one another, regardless of our different languages, cultures, ethnicities, and races.’”³

Likewise, the “don’t work together” interpretation is undermined by most of the rest of Scripture in which God continually calls the various characters into unity and conversation, every prophet saying, “Care for the people around you, do not abandon them, be together and create community.”

One of the many things I love about stories, holy or not, is that the words may not change but we do. Our understanding of them do. These two interpretations came from their time and are no longer useful; the sermon I preach today may not fit in twenty years, or tomorrow. This is why we re-read Scripture, why we do Bible study again, why we take days like Pentecost and Christmas and Easter to preach the same texts over and over: we have changed. The world around us has changed. We notice something new.

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” No, it didn’t. Dennis Bratcher writes, “Chapter 11 opens with the interesting comment that the whole earth had one language (v.1). The problem immediately apparent is that all through chapter 10 there have already been references to other languages associated with various groups of people (10:5, 20, 31). Rather than scrambling to find some historical or logical resolution to this discrepancy, this should be a rather immediate clue that we are not dealing with simple history here.”⁴ Genesis 10, sometimes called “The Table of Nations,” is a genealogy; chapter 9 is God’s covenant with Noah. The Tower of Babel shows up after the world has been reset by a flood, after a tale of such frustration and anger that planetary destruction seemed like the best option. Chapter ten gives us the list of Noah’s descendants, of how his family repopulated the world and built new cities and became new peoples, each with their own ideas and languages and cultures. If this chapter is telling us something that isn’t factual, why? What does it give the story?

Bratcher continues, “The unity of these people is not something positive, because they are unified around the wrong center. The focus of their unity is their own ability to establish themselves in the world apart from God (note the same idea in a scathing prophetic denunciation in Habakkuk 1:11, 16). Here echoes the same problem that was evidenced in the Eden story: they aspire to become like God, themselves establishing their place in the world and implementing their own rules by which they live in that world.”⁵

³ [Commentary on Genesis 11:1-9 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2025

⁴ [Cp Commentary, Genesis 11:1-9, Year C, Pentecost OT](#)

⁵ Ibid.

“‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves’.”

Like my high school that imposed uniformity in the name of unity, like any organization that erases difference and calls it agreement, the people who gathered to say they were all the same were undoing the fantastically wild creation of God. From the very beginning of our Scripture, Genesis 1, we are told that the world is filled with various and sundry things: God made the light and the dark, the heavens and the earth, the land and the sea, birds and sea monsters and cattle and bugs—so many bugs, the “wild animals of the earth of every kind,”⁶ the humans, and called every single thing *good*. Nothing about creation can be fit into a tidy box or a well-crafted tower, no matter how good the plans for it are because God doesn’t work in boxes. God doesn’t work in uniformity. God works in the infinite weirdness of God’s imagination that refuses to sacrifice the marvelous for the pliable.

“‘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.’”

This is what the “punishment” reading often hangs on, that people were too close to God and it freaked God out. But we who listen to these words a few thousand years later are well aware of what humans have done, of what we propose to do. We know how vast our own cruelty is, how easy it is to erase inconvenient differences. Perhaps God understood that this first seed of monotony had to be crushed before it sprouted, before we could return to the kind of evil washed away under Noah’s boat, before we looked at the vastness of creation and said, “We could make this smaller.” This, too, is why we re-read Scripture: to wrestle with the ways that God comes into our stories in ways we do not like and to ask each other whether we, too, are building a beautifully planned tower in which to put God so we can know where the Holy is, right where we expected it.

“Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’”⁷

The disciples in Acts have spent fifty days in intermittent visits with the risen Christ, wrapping their minds around this incredible shift in understanding what Jesus meant in all those teachings of His. They’re gathered together in one place, speaking one language, and maybe they, too, were thinking, “Let’s build ourselves a system to understand this, let’s build a temple to contain this, let’s make a name for ourselves as followers of the Way so that we know what it means.”

⁶ Gen. 1:25 NRSVue

⁷ Acts 2:5–12, NRSVue

And bless Her, the Spirit practically blows the roof off the place and sets them a little bit on fire. They do not speak the same language, but they have the same message: this is the story of Jesus the Christ Who taught, fought, and loved, Who was wrongly accused, cruelly crucified, miraculously raised. This is the Good News: that no one is anything other than God's beloved, that the tower of sameness is dismantled, that the Spirit's wings are wide as the world and there will be all sorts of names and histories and languages and cultures, that the Parthians and Egyptians and Judeans and Arabs are all welcome here, that God is never so small as to exclude people or make them into something they are not so that they fit.

It's Pride Month, Church, and there's a lot of conversation about how we queer folk are dangerous because we're different. There's a lot of conversation about how disabled folk are useless because they're different, or how those youth at the graduation ceremony are annoying because they're different, or how people of color are less than white folk because they're different, or how immigrants are unworthy of basic rights because they're different. Burn that nonsense in the fire of the Spirit, tear those towers of ignorance down, because God has swept through God's people and said, "Look, I am doing something new,"⁸ "where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth, when I told the sea where to stop?"⁹ Were we building bricks while God was building a world, telling ourselves that our plans were so good that even God would have to acknowledge them instead of listening for the rush of wind that changed everything?

We gather today to celebrate one of the two sacraments The United Methodist Church has, communion. Part of our liturgy is that we join the saints and the people around the world, and they don't all speak English. This holy meal is unity without uniformity, is fire without burning, is plans thrown to the Spirit-filled wind because Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me," of a different way, of a life in which the vastness of what could be can never fit into a single tower, a single identity, a single method. We come to this table shining in all the infinite ways of being we have because all are welcome, *all* are welcome, and God delights a thousandfold in saying every single one of our names, different and beautiful and holy. May we learn to embrace that, too. Amen.

⁸ Isaiah 43:19 paraphrase

⁹ Cf. Job 38