

Pentecost: Turning Chaos Into Community

Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-13

May 20, 2018
Faith Community

On this Pentecost Sunday we're looking at two stories from the Bible that complement each other and drive home timeless truth in the process.

Story number one is the Tower of Babel. The tower was actually a kind of pyramid with steps or ramps along the sides. These things could be as high as 300 feet and oftentimes just as wide. They were landmarks, the most prominent point in the cities where they were built. They spoke of the accomplishments of people who lived there and were monuments to their power and expertise.

You see it in the Genesis story.

....let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:4)

Security, preservation, and prestige are all through this. After all, it's a tough world out there, so let's hunker down and tough it out.

Now it's important to remember that this was not part of God's marching orders for them, which had been clearly laid out at the Creation, the beginning of it all. So important were they that they were repeated shortly after the flood, which Noah and his family survived.

"*Spread out,*" God told them both times:

....be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it. (9:7)

Here in this story they wanted to do the exact opposite. Spreading out was not as cool as staying put, in their estimation. God may have told them to do it but they thought otherwise, thank you very much.

The penalty for this was confusion. All of a sudden people couldn't understand each other, and because of that they scattered.

Now mind you, the problem was not just building the city and the tower. Instead, it was why they did it in the first place.

It went against everything God had envisioned for them. The tower builders were ready to settle for the good life instead of the God life. That happens all the time. We do it by confusing any number of things. We let the urgent replace the important. Personal power gets more attention than emotional maturity. Constant activity overrules a rich inner life.

....let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Since it was built in Babylon, it was named the Tower of Babel. That's a great play on words because in Hebrew it sounds like the verb 'to confuse.' Instead of becoming a center of pride and achievement, Babylon was known world wide as a place of confusion, since no one could understand each other anymore.

Friends, we know what that's like. We live in an "in your face/get out of my face" world. Listen to me or I'll call my favorite special interest group and launch a protest, but don't you dare make me feel bad or I'll get you fired or take you to court. We talk at each other instead of with each other, and might as well be speaking foreign languages.

At the other end of the spectrum is story number two.

Pentecost was one of the great Jewish national festivals. It was a harvest celebration with thousands of people from around the world in Jerusalem for this event, which made it all the more powerful.

The disciples were there too. And they were praying.

All of a sudden a wind came up, little fires appeared above them and just like that there were all kinds of chatter, different languages spoken all at the same time, but it wasn't Babel anymore. There was no confusion. Instead, there was understanding. People who'd come from far away suddenly hear their own languages coming out of people who had no clue just seconds before, and what's up with that? Something was different this time.

Notice the differences here. On the one hand, people want to make a name for themselves and get caught up in mind numbing clatter and racket. They talk at each other instead of with each other, and instead of a united spirit the world is filled with competing voices.

The Pentecost model shows people of different backgrounds and languages coming together, and instead of confusion finding clarity. And then community. The church is born. There's so much that separates us, and Pentecost takes the clamor of competing voices and turns it into a chorus of praise.

What makes the difference? God makes the difference. The Holy Spirit of God, to be specific.

Clatter becomes focused courage.

Racket is transformed into a chorus of praise.

And friends, some of you have yet to become Spirit filled like that. You don't have that understanding, that passion, or that zeal. You're too careful, much too calculated and measured in regards to the only thing that can give you hope and transformation.

You're living lives filled with clatter and racket.

Look at the lessons to be learned from these two stories.

- People wanting to make a name for themselves versus people praising the name of the Lord.
- People scattered all over the place because of a sudden confusion in which they couldn't understand each other anymore versus people coming together from all around the world, finding understanding and clarity in the midst of great diversity, and in the process being galvanized together to change the world.
- People wanting safety and predictability versus people energized by a God of great surprises.
- People who couldn't get along because their differences overruled whatever they may have had in common versus people finding common purpose in the midst of God initiated diversity.
- People's dreams lost versus people coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ that changes everything.

Pentecost was a game changer. The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to become witnesses to the resurrection of Christ as the fundamental fact in history, and to extend the church according to Christ's commandment.¹

What's it going to be for you? What'll it be for this church?

Friends, the world is desperate for this kind of communal clarity and courageous commitment.

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia