

MAKING A NAME FOR OURSELVES

SHERARD EDINGTON

Genesis 11:1-9

On the church calendar, today is the day of Pentecost, the day widely regarded as the birthday of the Christian church.

Our first reading today was from the book of Acts. The book of Acts describes how, following his resurrection, Jesus spends time with his disciples teaching them about the kingdom of God before ascending into heaven. Jesus instructs his followers to wait together in Jerusalem. So they do.

Pentecost did not originate with the Christian church. It is an ancient Jewish festival that commemorates God's delivering the Ten Commandments to Moses.

So, it was on the day of this Jewish festival of Pentecost that the followers of Jesus are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem (as Jesus had specified) when something happens. It is difficult to explain. There is a noise—a loud, chaotic noise. It is like an airplane flying low over your house at the very same time that a freight train is passing by while both your neighbors are mowing their lawns. Our Scripture describes it as being *like the rush of a violent wind*. And by violent, think tornado. This noise fills the house where Jesus' followers are gathered.

Then, in addition to the noise, there are these strange images that appear in the house among the people. These objects look like flames of fire and they dance among the believers. A flame rests above each person there.

We know today that what these people experienced in that room is the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit. And each person in the room is filled with that Spirit. As John the Baptist foretold about Jesus, *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Luke 3:16). This Pentecost event is their baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Now, at this time in Israel's history, Pentecost was a widely observed festival. Jews from all over the world converged on Jerusalem to worship and to celebrate. Many had traveled from different lands speaking different languages. And the turbulent sounds emanating from the house where the disciples are gathered draws attention. And a crowd congregates outside.

As the followers of Jesus pour out into the street, the crowd is confused and astonished because, for some unexplainable reason, they are able to understand these Galileans even in their own native tongues. It seems that the Holy Spirit has gifted the believers with the ability to speak in foreign languages—to be understood by others.

And then we, the reader, are provided that lengthy list of peoples and nations, supposedly representing each group in the crowd: *Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia* and so on.

Each of these people understands what the disciples are saying, that they are speaking about God and telling of God's deeds of power. They are all Jews here for the festival so they would open to these words. But there are some in the crowd who denounce the disciples saying that they are not speaking in any language, but they are simply babbling after drinking too much cheap wine.

So, Peter steps forward and takes control of the situation. He addresses the crowd telling them that the disciples are not drunk because for one thing, it is only nine o'clock in the morning. Peter quotes the prophet Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. On that day there will be prophesying, and dreams, and visions. When that day comes, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Then, Peter preaches. He tells the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all. The crowd responds and they ask Peter what they might do, how they might be part of this plan. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

The result, as we are told, is that 3000 people are baptized that day. And the community of believers begins to grow and the people share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. The church is born.

That is the account of Pentecost. Today, however, I would like to focus on another story about God's great plan, a story which also involves a diversity of languages and peoples. I want to talk about the story of the city of Babel.

We find this story in the earliest part of our Bible, in the book of Genesis, in the 11th chapter. Biblical scholars categorize these first chapters of Genesis as prehistory, telling of a time before time.

It is in this prehistory that we are given the accounts of creation and sin. We read the stories of Adam, Eve, and their sons Cain, Abel, and Seth. We read the story of the great flood and of God's covenant with Noah. And then in chapter 11, we encounter this peculiar little story about a place called Babel.

The story of Babel is not so much an historical record as it is an attempt to decipher our world. The Babel story has been described as an early folk tale. Joseph Campbell would label it a myth. I, on the other hand, like to think of it as a parable.

Its purpose is to help us understand our relationship with the Lord. So, instead of trying to prove the story of Babel, let's treat it as we would a parable.

The story begins with the assertion that all the inhabitants of the earth spoke one language and lived as one people. We know this is not the case because right before this story we've been given a list of all the nations and languages of the earth. This story sets itself apart from reality.

In the story, the people of the earth are described as being nomads who come from the east. They arrive at this valley in the land of Shinar. It was an enticing place and they decided to settle there. And once settled, they put down roots and built buildings and created a city. No longer would they be a wandering people.

This city they created was different because, for one reason, the people chose to build with kiln-fired bricks instead of using sun-dried bricks or stone.

Now, those hearing this story would understand the significance of the use of this type of brick. In the land of Palestine, houses were generally constructed with rocks. They have lots of rocks. And for a major building, such as a temple, they would quarry stone. For less important structures, they might use mud bricks dried in the sun. Mud bricks were quick and easy and cheap but not permanent.

Kiln-dried bricks, on the other hand, were not only more costly to produce, they were downright extravagant. These were the materials that were used in the city of Babylon, an almost mythical place that only a few travelers had seen. But the images of that great city filled the imaginations of all who heard of them. For the people of Palestine, Babylon was Utopia, El Dorado, and Shangri-La all rolled up into one.

But back to the story: not only did the people set out to build a city, but they set about to build a great tower within their city, *a tower with its top in the heavens*.

Their purpose for building this tower was to *Make a name for [themselves]*. Because they feared that if they didn't, then *[they would] be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth*.

The insecurity of these people is the same that afflicts us all even today—that we will be insignificant, that we will be nobodies, that we will be forgotten. Their decision was to band together and make a name for themselves. They built this great tower. And then the story tells us that the Lord came down to see the city and the tower. Did you hear that? The Lord came down to view this tower which purportedly reached into heaven. If it reached into heaven, then why did the Lord need to come down? Maybe the tower was not as grand as they supposed.

The Lord took a look around and said, *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 scatters the people across the face of the earth, and they abandon their city.

The city constructed by the people was called Babel. Babel literally means “Gate of God” and is a not-so-subtle reference to the great city Babylon. In this parable, here at Babel, the people seek to erect their own gate to heaven so that they might make a name for themselves and not be forgotten. But God steps in and confounds their plans—God confuses their ability to communicate. The Hebrew word for ‘confuse’ is *balel*. In a classic Hebrew play on words, the Lord “balel-ed Babel.”

The big question that this story raises is why did the Lord feel it necessary to disrupt the work of the people by confusing their language and scattering them across the face of the earth? Was God jealous of their accomplishments? Was God threatened by their city? Was God uneasy with their grand plans for their heaven-scraping tower? No. The common interpretation is that God is punishing the people for the audacity of building a tower to heaven. But I disagree.

I believe that God’s actions were not a punishment, but rather were a gift. It was a gift to set humanity on the right path. Remember, this is a parable that speaks to us all.

The people of Babel sought to construct a monument to self-reliance. If they could reach heaven on their own then they wouldn’t need God. If they could attain salvation by their own volition, they they would be gods. They could claim the title of god themselves. They they would not longer need the Lord.

But that is not God’s plan for them or us. God created us and wills to journey with us, to be with us, to love us. It is not God’s desire to be left behind.

The people wanted to make a name for themselves. God has nothing against a name. In fact, just turn the page from the Babel story and we find God’s covenant with Abraham. In this covenant, God vows, *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* And today, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all call themselves descendants of Abraham. God has nothing against a name.

What God did at Babel was not a punishment, but a redirection. God saves the people from their self-destructive arrogance. Their plan was to construct a monument of self-reliance. Their plan was to become gods.

So, in this Babel parable, God confuses the people with language and scatters them across the world. Now, at Pentecost, the people converge from scattered lands and with different languages, and through the power of the Holy Spirit are able to understand one another. They are no longer confused. Pentecost is a reversal of the Babel story.

It was necessary for God to hinder the people from making the wrong name for themselves. They wanted the name god. But we should desire another name—not god, but children of God, Christians, disciples, servants, givers of compassion. That should be the name we seek; that should be the name that we work for. We don't need a great name, just a good one.

How many churches today fall into the trap of seeking to make a name for themselves—of being the biggest, or the most powerful, with a celebrity preacher and the most Instagram followers. Is that what we are called to do, to build a stairway to heaven? Or, do you think that we should strive to worship God, share the Gospel, and serve others? Which sounds more Christian?

Jesus instructed his followers to remain together in Jerusalem. They did. They holed up in a house and likely would have stayed there. But the Holy Spirit came and lit a fire under them forcing them out into the streets to share the gospel with the world. The Holy Spirit then scattered them across the world with the job to speak to all people about God's great plan of salvation.

Their job—our job—is to build not a tower but a church, a church that spreads out across the land to establish the kingdom of God.