

HEAVEN CAME DOWN

Sermon, May 23, 2021

Pentecost Sunday

Texts: Genesis 11:1-9; Selections from Acts 2

The Bible tells us (*see Exodus 4:10*) one of the reasons Moses was reluctant to take on what God was calling him to was that he wasn't eloquent, he wasn't a speaker; some language scholars think the Hebrew indicates he may have even had a speech impediment (*literally, the phrase is translated "I've a heavy tongue"*), that he may have had a stuttering problem. There's an old joke that has been circulating in Israel for decades, and it tends to make the rounds again whenever Israel's hostile neighbors act up; this tiny nation in the middle east is surrounded by hostile neighbors (*reflecting on current events of the past week or two, imagine having 4,000 rockets raining over Rhode Island launched from Connecticut ... rockets that were mostly made in New Hampshire ... and you have a rough approximation of the hostility of middle eastern geography Israel has to deal with*). The joke goes that God offered Moses his pick of lands, his choice of places to which he could take the children of Israel from out of Egypt. Moses somehow knew that Canada was a large place with lots of room and peaceful neighbors and an enormous variety of natural resources, including oil, and so he stammered, "*Cana-Cana-Cana ...*" Well, God thought he was saying "Canaan." And so that's how the children of Israel got this tiny land with few resources and hostile neighbors on every side.

Language can be a tricky means of communication for all sorts of reasons, even when people are speaking the same language! Communication problems, however, are not limited to those who have speech impediments or who speak different languages. I've cited this before, but the *Ladies Home Journal* once surveyed 30,000 readers and asked them to rank the problems they face in their marriages. The #1 problem was money/financial problems. The #2 problem was poor communication. Researcher Terry Schultz wrote, "*Although many women chose their partners based largely upon attraction and sex appeal, research shows that if they had it to do again, they said the ability to communicate is much more important. Communication ranked higher than physical attraction, physical appearance, higher than personality, higher than financial status.*"

A significant part of the Pentecost miracle is that language was not a barrier; all heard the message of the disciples clearly, and they heard it in their own languages, and some three thousand people came to believe that message! Some commentators speculate as to whether this was primarily a miracle of hearing, rather than a miracle of speaking; suffice it to say for now, it seems to have been both. At Pentecost, **the story of Babel is reversed**. At Babel, proud humanity wanted to build a tower to **reach heaven**. In Pentecost, **heaven came down** to earth to reach us (*in the words of the previous hymn, "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul."*) And when heaven came down, and God poured out His Spirit, the con-fusion of languages begun at Babel was exchanged for a fusion of language, and "... *each one heard them speaking in his own language.*"

But again, language can be a tricky means of communication, even when people are ostensibly speaking the same language. Communication is a skill, a learned art, and it can be difficult to clearly say what you mean. Communication, clearly expressing what is on our minds in such a way as to be understood, does not come automatically; it needs to be worked at. And communication is further complicated because listening is really a skill, a learned art. Let me say that again: Listening is a skill, a learned art; it is something that needs to be worked at. I've read years ago the Communication Department at UCLA studied people's listening skills and came to this conclusion: The average person only hears about half of what is actually said. The study also went on to conclude that the average person only *understands* half of that! So now we're down to the average listener only hearing *and* comprehending about a quarter of what was actually said. The study also revealed the average listener only *believes* half of that, and then only *remembers* half of *that* later on! *Hears half, understands half of that, believes half of that, remembers half of that.* So, that's comes out to just about six percent ... the average (unskilled) listener hears, comprehends, believes and remembers about *six percent* of what someone says! Is it any wonder we have communication problems? Added to that is the problem that so many of us often put our tongues in drive before we get our minds in gear. Added to that is the reality that we're often thinking about what we're going to say next while the other person is talking. And added to *that* is the reality that sometimes we often can't even agree on the meaning of our common words ... and when that happens, communication can just break down altogether. When communication breaks down, quite often the community it engenders breaks down and comes apart as well. When communication breaks down, people have a tendency to scatter and separate and isolate and "social distance."

We read earlier in Genesis 11: "... *as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.*"

They said to one another, 'Come let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' " Paraphrased, these people are saying, "Let us come together, let us build, let us erect a name for ourselves, then we will no longer be scattered." Genesis 11 takes place on a plain in Shinar, which the Bible footnote tells us, is in Babylonia. Interestingly, in the Babylonian language, the city's name means "Gateway to God." Some historians speculate that a technological innovation was invented at this time, an innovation which helped changed the shape of history: the brick. Prior to this time, people used stone, or mud and straw, and their buildings could only rise a story or two at the most. But once they learned to bake bricks in ovens, then the sky was the limit. *Technology* could take them to the heights of heaven, they thought. *Technology* would bring them together, give them unity, give them a name, and make them great. Technology would give them unity, purpose, mission, a sense of destiny and greatness; technology would help them make a name for themselves.

However, there is something missing from these first four verses. In these first four verses, God is never mentioned. They never ask questions like, "What would God want us to do?" "How would God want us to use this technology?" Technology can be used, and used well, to serve others, but it can also be used nefariously to control others, to abuse others and to censor others. Here in Genesis it seems to be all about them, what they want, and their effort and their political machinations to make a great name for themselves and find unity and meaning and purpose and greatness ... with no acknowledgement of God, no acknowledgement of a need for guidance from God, no acknowledgement of a need for repentance before God, no acknowledgement of a need to listen to God for divine direction. And they go on to employ this modern technology in this monumental quest to build a great tower, a great civilization, a great name for themselves ... apparently apart from God and His moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance.

We are told the Lord looks down, and sizes up what they are doing. I don't think what bothered God was either the city or the tower. Nor was it God saying to the angels, "Oh, if those humans succeed in building this high, well, there goes the neighborhood!" Nor was God bothered by the use of technology and know how; after all, He created humanity in His image, and He is the Creator ... human creativity and ingenuity, in and of itself, would not bother God. I think what bothered Him was the *motivation* in all this, and the potential destruction that could result: people thinking that they could attain greatness, that they could be great, great like God ... all on their own.

Not that it's wrong to want to be like God; in fact, the Bible does call us to be imitators of God. But they apparently didn't want to be like God in holiness; they didn't want to be like God in purity and love and graciousness and mercy and kindness. They wanted to be like God in height, and power, and name, and all on their own effort and by their own methods and building huge towers to make a name for *themselves*, not for God's honor or glory. God understands that when human beings try to *be* God while ignoring God and His good ways, it just does not work! When we over-reach our created capacity as creatures, when we leave God out of the picture and try to be as Gods ourselves, we invariably cause great harm and destruction; human history has displayed this with depressing repetition. Perhaps the danger God perceived here is the very real harm human beings find themselves capable of doing to each other when they leave God out of the picture, when they seek to attain greatness and power on their own terms. So perhaps out of mercy God decides to spare them the trouble. Out of love, He opts to frustrate their out-sized ambitions, and He con-fused them by giving them many languages.

It's immediately after the story of Babel and confused language in Genesis 11 that the Bible begins the long story of God's redemption, the story that begins in chapter 12 with Abram who lived in the area around Babel, and ultimately leads to Jesus Christ, the *Word* made flesh. As mentioned earlier, at Babel proud humanity wanted to build a tower to reach heaven. In Jesus Christ, **heaven came down** to proud humanity. God left heaven and came down in the flesh to earth to reach us. And on the Day of Pentecost described in the second chapter of Acts, we see something of a reversal of Babel. When the Word made flesh pours out His Spirit, the con-fusion of languages is exchanged for a fusion of languages. There is so much that can be said about this, but for now I'll just point out that the same God Who, out of mercy and compassion, scattered humanity by confounding our communication now through the outpouring of His Spirit begins the process of uniting us with one language, the language of faith in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Whenever people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, scattered, human beings are drawn together into community, a new community, a truly great community called the family of God ... for Jesus Christ is the real "gateway to God," and we will remain restless, unsettled and scattered until at last we find our unity and our rest in Him.