

Acts 2:1-13  
Genesis 11:1-9  
Are We Even Speaking the Same Language?  
WRCoB 5.31.20

Early in my first term in Nigeria in the 90s  
We attended a church service in the town of Biu  
A couple hours from home.

The famed evangelist, the late Rev. Mai Sule Bui  
Was to preach and I wanted to hear him.

Mai Sule Bui was in line for the chieftainship of Bui  
But as a kid, he ended up with leprosy  
And was sent away as an outcast  
To the Brethren Leprosarium.

Consequently, he converted to Christianity from Islam  
And ended up a beloved evangelist for the church.

~~

So, fresh from a 3-month Hausa language class  
We entered the city  
And stopped to ask a man for directions.

He was sitting on a rock next to the road.

I went up to him and greeted him in Hausa.  
So far so good.

I then tried to ask him for directions to the church.  
No response.

Ok, I thought . . . let me try to rephrase it . . .  
Still no response.

OK I thought . . . let me just try something else.

Finally, the man finally spoke up . . .  
*Speak English your Hausa is terrible!*

Ouch! The lesson?

It helps to speak the same language  
When asking for directions.

~~

First appearances might not show a connection  
Between our OT and NT scripture lessons but there is

The passage from Genesis  
Is the story of the tower of Babel.

At that time, the whole earth had but one language.

Humankind flourished.

The people got together and decided to build a city  
With a tower that reached the heavens.

God saw their intentions  
That united in one language and one task  
Pride would fill their hearts.

In response, God confused their language  
So that they no longer understood each other.

The architects argued with the electricians  
The stone masons with their laborers

And their building enterprise came to a screeching halt.

They scattered and went their own way  
And named the place Babel

A word meaning  
A confusing noise coming from a collection of voices.

~~

Now we move many years forward  
To an event recorded in the Book of Acts.

We come to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

After Jesus had risen from the grave  
And just before he ascended to heaven

He told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem  
For the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And so fifty days following Passover  
During the Jewish festival known as Pentecost

As the disciples were in prayer  
The Holy Spirit came down upon them in mighty way.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke.

People from all over the world  
Who had gathered in Jerusalem for the festivity  
Heard the disciples speaking in their own language.

They were shocked . . .

These disciples were Galileans  
How could they speak their language?

There were sixteen different language groups represented.

They had no way of explaining it  
Except to say, they must be drunk.

Everyone heard the disciples speak about the things  
God had done in Christ Jesus.

~~

Here is the connection.

In the story of the tower of Babel  
God confused the language and scattered the people.

God saw that they were self-centered  
Looking to ***make a name for themselves (4)***.

And so, God frustrated their attempts  
Causing misunderstanding and division among them.

But in the Pentecost event  
The disciples were God-centered  
And God brought people together again.

And despite sixteen different languages spoken  
Everyone understood the message.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit!

And this is what we celebrate today  
The arrival of the Holy Spirit  
In the event we know as Pentecost  
The birthday of the church.

The disciples baptized three thousand people that very day!

~~

Babel, a cacophony of noise.

That's how I describe social media.

Don't get me wrong, I'm right in the thick of it too!

The internet has done wonders in giving access  
To a wealth of information.

I "Google" just about everything now  
From Bible commentary  
To news and weather.

The World Wide Web gives us the ability  
To communicate across the globe  
Freely and instantaneously.

It has given us the opportunity to continue  
To provide worship services during the pandemic

It is wonderful technology.

It's been a God-send for people trapped in their homes

However, at the same time, it serves to confuse and divide.

There is so much misinformation out there

That if not properly vetted

We would live in fear of every conspiracy theory

That comes our way.

There are very divisive voices out there

Stirring the fires of division

And social media is their medium.

The din of their voices has become so loud and confusing

And all together extreme, that it seems

We're not even speaking the same language.

You would think, the current situation

Would draw us closer, united for the common good of all.

Remember when people

Rallied around a national or international crisis

Working together, united in their focus and effort?

Not anymore!

Even Covid 19 has become divisive.

Instead of an act of courtesy and a safe guard for neighbor

Wearing a mask is now political.

If you wear one, you're a bleeding-heart liberal.  
If you don't, you're a gun-toting freedom fighter!

Everyone is bent on making sure  
Their voice is heard  
Their viewpoint is clear  
Their position is unarguable.

With the internet, everyone has become the expert!

CDC can't tell me what to do! I know better!

Are we speaking the same language?  
Are we seeking to understand one another?  
Or are we a cacophony of babel?

I am so tired of it!

We are building the tower of Babel all over again.

~~

I want so much to hear a voice  
Above the din and babel!

I want so much to speak a language we all understand.

Is there such a thing? I believe there is.

It is the language of the Spirit, the voice of God.

It was the voice heard and understood  
By those people from sixteen different ethnicities  
During the first Pentecost.

The same Spirit that started the church  
From a handful of fearful and confused disciples  
To over two billion believers.

It is the voice heard above the cacophony of today's Babel.

"Be still and know God."

~~

I know it is difficult to hear the voice of God  
Above the clamor in our lives.

But it is there, inspiring, guiding, forgiving, loving.

It calls for truth and justice  
For dignity and integrity  
For patience and kindness

Above all, it calls for love  
Love for God and love for neighbor.

If we listen, we will hear the voice of redemption  
A voice we can understand in any language.

As the great song proclaims  
*Oh for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise.*

Pentecost, the birthday of the church, was a day  
Everyone in his or her own language  
Heard and understood the message of Jesus

And united under the Holy Spirit's fire  
They scattered out into the four corners of the world  
Bearing the message of reconciliation.

Oh, if we could only hear that message today  
Above the din of division.

~~

Interestingly . . . to finish the story, that very same day  
We were asking for directions in Bui, Nigeria

I encountered the language of the Spirit.

We arrived at the church and they placed us in front  
Behind the pulpit where they seated important guests.

I've never seen a more crowded church!

Everyone came to hear Mai Sule Bui  
Sing and preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

Every window filled with faces looking in from outside.

Every tree in the compound  
Filled with late comers who gathered underneath.

When it was time for Mai Sule to speak  
The whole church leaned forward  
In breathless expectation.

He began with a song in the local Bura language.

Now as I said at the beginning of my sermon  
I knew just a smidgen of Hausa.

But in Biu they spoke Bura  
I did not understand a word.

But let me tell you . . .  
The language of the Spirit  
Hit me with such force

That though I didn't understand the words  
I understood the message!

With tears flowing down my face  
A Pentecost experience filled me.

~~

If I could understand the message of Jesus  
In a language that I didn't know

Just think what could happen  
When we speak the language of the Spirit  
In a language we all understood!

The language of the Spirit  
Is the message of Jesus  
Spoken in gentleness, self-control  
And in an attitude of humility.

I pray we learn to speak in this language  
For the sake of our neighbor  
And for the glory of God! Amen.