

## Sermon for Pentecost

RCL Lectionary

[Genesis 11:1-9](#) / [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#) / [Acts 2:1-21](#) / [John 14:8-17, 25-27](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California

## Babel, Oil, and Pentecost

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Happy Pentecost! This, one of the high holy days of the Church Year, fifty days after Easter. This day, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at a time when our lives – personal, communal, and corporate – are intertwined with delightful images of the Spirit at work in our midst. I think of the strange winds of this weekend, blowing up cold at what should be an otherwise dry and warming time of year. Or working on this sermon in English while my son and wife sat nearby working on Japanese. And the wonderful sound of different languages spoken in this place this morning simultaneously, the voices of our diversity of background and education, of social class and race, of heritage and even belief. . . brought together by our God, this poetic God who weaves the tangible and metaphors, the real and the imagined parts of our lives together into a rich tapestry of renewal, hope, and grace.

This God who is anything but predictable. Our readings this morning, in their striking contrasts, highlight the actions of our most capricious and unpredictable God. We open with another primordial story from Genesis. At face value, it has what the scholarly types like to call an *etiological* purpose. Like the rainbow being explained in the story of Noah as a sign of God's promise not to destroy the earth again, the Tower of Babel is intended to explain the diversity of the world's languages and cultures. In this way, the Genesis reading today *is* primordial, akin to its ancient parallels the world over that explain to countless generations of children why things are the way they are, why the human family is shaped in all of our confusing and wonderful array of tongues and civilizations.

But beyond mere *etiology*, if that may be called a "mere" thing, is the theology of the story of the Tower of Babel. And that is also a story about morality and a basic feature of our human societies across the ages – the sin of pride, of human hubris. We can laugh about simple stories about towers rising to reach to the heavens – to reach God until God and the heavenly courts begin to get nervous about our power. We can laugh until we start to reflect on what went on in towering edifices in our great cities that contributed to the Great Recession. Instead of Towers of Babel these days, we have Towers Too Big to Fail. Instead of the disaster of divided tongues in a massive engineering achievement, we see the tragedy of destroyed lives and an unprecedented oil slick growing in the Gulf of Mexico.

Lest we think God “fixed” us as a human family, neutered our pride in the primordial story of the Tower of Babel. . . the story continues to stand for a world still very much a part of our lives – one with which we are very much mixed up, whether we are still sorting out the mess brought upon us by the economic and financial crisis, or filling up at the gas pump as we all must while wrestling with our driving addiction to the black goo.

The Tower of Babel is as old as the human family is, and God, it seems, still comes down and shatters the tower, scattering us in our collective arrogance. The disaster in the Gulf, of course, is now all about finger-pointing between juggernauts like BP, the federal government, Transocean, and Haliburton. The fishermen scream for their livelihoods while shop owners, hotel managers, and environmentalists all together sing a chorus of pain even with the trauma of Katrina still all too fresh in their minds. We are like the people who built the Tower now scattered by our own different tongues and agendas while the black crude leaks into our hearts, threatening to poison us with our own arrogant tacit or explicit insistence on drilling deeper, faster, and more profitably. And who pays for the cost of the failed Tower of Babel? We blame big oil. We blame technological advancement. We blame lobbyists and inept politicians. The truth that virtually no media outlet will tell you is that it literally is no one’s fault. But, as we are in the process of discovering, the resulting mess, much like our economic crisis, now *is* most assuredly everyone’s responsibility.

But lest you think I’m just going to beat up on our shared secular arrogance, The Tower of Babel was very much part of the story of the institutional Church across the ages. Make no mistake. Think of the historic crusades and heretics burned at stakes, of popes, kings, and princes assuming totalitarian control over belief. We consider the dangers of declaring and judging what is *orthodox* – what is right teaching – and what is *heterodox* or wrong teaching – and then declaring our divine authority over the fates of other human beings. If that isn’t the arrogance and pride of Babel, I’m not sure what is.

We must consider the tired refrain these days in old ecclesiastical institutions like The Episcopal Church, where the old isn’t working so well anymore, our institution is struggling with too much expense, too little revenue, too little flexibility in an era of rapid change. We look at our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers struggling with yet another dreadful scandal built on a tower of power and control not unlike Babel’s. We look at our so-tired struggle with the wider Anglican Communion over sexuality – sexuality, you see, is far easier to fight over than the dreadful hungers and disease of a suffering world. We tried to build our own Tower of Babel in the heyday of Empire and in the post-war boom, and now some of us in the wider Church wring our hands and even go to battle over whether or not our Tower to God may be “going out of business.” But I say maybe the reality is that the God who abruptly ended the Babel building project is very much in our midst putting our institution *as it was* out of business. Why? Because, as Jesus taught us, in order to have new life, we must die to our old selves. In order to be in the business of the Gospel,

we have to set aside our obsessions with the business of preserving an institution. That was a lesson of Easter, after all.

And the good news of today, the Gospel of Pentecost, is that God does not leave us babbling there at the foot of our crumbling edifices. For our Acts reading points us to a new primordial story that redeems the toppling of the Tower of Babel, and ushers in the new life of an ever new and renewed Church – not merely an institutional church mind you, but a new and ever renewed church born of water and the Spirit. The story of the Spirit coming amongst the disciples in Jerusalem centuries ago is about the birth of this new community – not one built on “too big to fail,” or “bigger, faster, better,” or even the hubris of demanding we all be or believe the same way, but built upon the diversity of the human family itself. Diversity is no longer a simple, harsh cure to our arrogance, but an avenue to the renewal of life, by the ways in which it undoes and remakes the old order – the way in which all is made new. And it is so crazy that we might be declared drunk on the wine of life, like the first apostles were. Yet it is only morning!

Is it not the Spirit’s unbounded wonder these days that we talk about diversifying our economy rather than relying on a handful of juggernauts to sustain us? Is it not the Spirit’s wisdom to suggest that the abundant energy around us demands a diversity of approaches rather than the singular dependence on drilling harder and deeper for more crude? And is it not the Spirit’s work that when communities like ours embrace our wide variety, our diversity of gifts, we grow, despite the declines of the larger institution?

And if you find that a little bit to “out there” to grasp, just look around you. Where today do you find community as wide-ranging as ours, where people young and old from every walk of life gather together in the generosity common prayer and share from a common cup and a common plate. Where we break bread, splash water, and celebrate the new life we are offered by our unpredictable but ever-loving God. Where we are cured of our hubris not simply by the toppling of our Towers, but by the simple proclamation that our God in Christ lives. And how do we know that’s true? Not through simple deduction or force of saying it over and over. We know, because we see the many fruits of the Spirit in our lives, each in our own way: we feel the hope, we follow the thread of love. Even though it is often buried by all our concerns and worries, it breaks out of the tomb again. It blows among us, and alights upon us as a dove bringing promise of renewal. It is the challenge our diversity and difference brings into our midst that breaks through the stone of our hearts and causes us to offer our myriad diverse gifts and sing praise together in unison.

This Church, this Body in the Spirit, is the new community. It is the new creation after the ending of the Tower of Babel. We all know in our hearts the juggernauts that are “too big to fail” will indeed collapse now and in the future. We all know our empires will continue their cycle of rising and falling. We know that our dependence on oil will and must come to an end. We know that no institution, even a church institution, lasts forever. But the hope is what we celebrate this day – a

promise not just for us, but the promise of the Gospel for all of the human family – for all of creation – in all of our glorious, abundant diversity of gifts. The gifts of ingenuity and imagination that the Spirit brings – gifts that will conquer the oil slicks and renew our common economic life. A Spirit that will restore health and justice to the planet and to our shared peace. A Spirit that will re-build our community for a new day, start our community afresh as it did to the scattered peoples gathered in Jerusalem that Pentecost almost 2,000 years ago. The Spirit that will wake us up to become the creatures of God we are called to be: each unique individually, but together, an image of our wonderful God, building new, diverse life for all eternity.