

# Babel On, Babble Off

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
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## **Genesis 11:1-9**

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar, and they settled there. And they said to each other, “Come, let us make bricks, and fire them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and tar for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered all over the earth.”

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which people had built. And the Lord said, “Look! As one people, all with one language, this is what they have begun to do. Now nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other’s language.”

And the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth. And they stopped building the city. So it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth and from there the Lord scattered them all over the earth.

## **Sermon**

In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning God spoke. Among other things, God said, “Let us make humanity in our image.” So, from the beginning, human beings have been talking. We wag our tongues to wound and to heal. We talk to tease and to flirt. And like God, we wield words to create.

“Come,” the people said, “let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered all over the earth” (v. 4). And they set to work, day after day.

On a splendid Thursday afternoon – a day that would live in infamy – the sun shone brightly in the plain of Shinar. Flowers scented the breeze. Songbirds filled the air with music. And words punctuated their song. Instructing. Ordering. Creating. Giving shape to a ziggurat, a Mesopotamian pyramid. The work progressed splendidly. And as the high tower grew, it gave focus to all humanity. Each day’s work yielded up enough progress at least to celebrate, if not to marvel at. But this day was destined to be different.

In the beginning God said, “Fill the earth.” God intended human beings to embody the divine presence and rule – to bear the stamp of God’s image – all the way to the far-flung corners of creation. Yet from the beginning we human beings rebelled against God’s intent. We preferred to make our own decisions about how to live and where.

On the plain of Shinar, the rebellion took highly organized form. An industrial revolution changed the visible landscape, helped along by a most valuable resource: a common language. A common language might have enabled the human community to cover the face of the earth and yet to remain united. A common language might have helped human beings to use their unity in the service of God, to be God’s agents of blessing throughout all creation. To control the weeds and cultivate the flowers. To join the birds in song and the ants in labor. To lead every creature in humble adoration of God. But on the plain of Shinar that grand potential was subverted. Human beings put their common tongue to rebel purposes, refusing to fill the earth.

And God said, “Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other’s language.” (v. 7). And a common language sounded for the last time. Suddenly, when people spoke – whether to instruct, to command, or to create – no one could hear them, not their

words, not their meaning. It was only sound, sound that scattered across the sunlit plain in every direction with no returning echo of comprehension. God enrolled the entire human race in “Babble as a First Language” classes. And working together became impossible.

That’s the Babel story. It’s a story about language. But much more it is a story about unity. By disrupting human language, God disrupted human unity. It’s a disruption that remains to this day, with one notable exception. Pentecost Sunday is a good day to acknowledge and to celebrate that exception – and I’m not talking about the United Nations!

Ten days after a cloud hid the ascending Jesus from his disciples, the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered church in Jerusalem. Suddenly people started speaking in languages they had never known. Everyone in the crowd could hear someone speaking in his or her mother tongue. And all together they heard a story about the glory of God. Out of nowhere, the broken language of humanity no longer disrupted human unity. It lasted only a moment. But as the echoes faded, a single silence heralded the arrival of a new day.

On Pentecost the many languages of Babel did not meld into one language again. No, the divided tongues remained. Yet on that day fire from God united a diverse human population, not under a common language, but under a common story, the story of the Gospel. On Pentecost, a multitude of languages erupted with the Gospel story. And several thousand people, who had once been scattered across the earth, found themselves standing together, united as one new people of God. And in this unity the fiery light of one Spirit blazed. This is some of what we mean when we confess *one holy catholic and apostolic church*.

In the church we see, at last, a people who, by the Spirit, begin to embody the divine presence and rule all the way to the ends of the earth. Before, God had prevented human unity, which could only be destructive. Now God fashions a new human unity which overflows with creating energy. To tell the Gospel. To bring the power of the Gospel to bear on a broken, distorted world. To live in the new world being painstakingly created by that Gospel – the new world we call the Kingdom of God.

Of course, that’s not exactly what we see. The history of the church is full of shadows as well as light. And the church itself is fragmented, so far from unity, so far from serving the Kingdom only honorably. However, even small beginnings signal the presence of the Kingdom. And those small beginnings abound. Small beginnings of reconciliation, justice, and peace, of mercy and stewardship, of obedience, worship, and prayer. Permit me to mention two of those small beginnings. (I hope you will think of your own examples.)

In recent years, I have come to know, to respect, and to appreciate the Rev. Vincent Frosh, pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. During that time, Vince has come to know, to respect, and to appreciate me.

For two years now, Vince has invited me to speak at his church’s Good Friday service. Both years, a small contingent from Olentangy Church has come to be a part of the community gathered at 1<sup>st</sup> AME Zion for worship. (You can tell who we Olentangy people are: we’re the white folks sitting close to one another.)

Several months ago, we held our “sort-of-annual” concert here. Mikhail and his colleague Arkadiy Gips were the featured performers. Also on the bill was a small gospel ensemble from 1<sup>st</sup> AME Zion church. (Before they got up to sing, you could tell who they were: they were the black folks sitting close to one another.)

This is new ground for us. We haven’t embraced it fully. Only some of us have taken part – I hope more of us will participate in the future. But onto this new ground we have been taking important steps. And these steps are Kingdom steps, Kingdom steps shepherded by the Holy Spirit, who works in our hearts, prompts our feet, and assures us that these steps are right and necessary and good.

Here's another, small beginning. For several years now, we have been a member congregation of BREAD. Beyond the working for justice – which is an important expression of our faith – there is also, in BREAD, a gathering into a unity we might not have imagined a few years ago.

In small meetings and large meetings, we have found ourselves mixed up with Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Unitarians. We have bridged gaps of culture and race and prosperity. We have rubbed shoulders. We have bumped elbows. It's not a perfect unity by any means. Our connections remain shallow, and they don't reach out all that far, not yet.

Latino congregations are conspicuously absent from BREAD. There is no Muslim presence. If there were, we might feel a bit uneasy – we can admit that. And there is no presence of people from non-Abrahamic faiths: Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus. That could really throw us for a loop. But we could and would continue to participate and to do so unapologetically as followers of Jesus Christ.

Even though the unity is far from perfect, it remains. There is a coming together, for the sake of justice, to build a better community – not to make a name for ourselves, but to fulfil that basic human calling, given us all in the beginning: to be a channel of God's blessing to the world for the sake of the well-being, the flourishing, of life. BREAD is one expression of obedience to this calling. And it is a shared obedience, because the Holy Spirit has been moving us and many others, bridging the gaps that divide us. A small beginning certainly, but an important one.

Now, those are just two examples and local ones at that. But small beginnings like these abound in a world that is being renewed by the Spirit. When people around the globe and in every community – whatever their culture, whatever their language, whatever their history and their pain – when people live together in the light of God's Kingdom, that is Babel undone. And that is what Pentecost is about.