

Pentecost- 9 June, 2019
St. Andrews, Encinitas
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This morning, in Genesis, we heard the story of The Tower of Babel- and it's a funny one. We're 11 chapters into the book that narrates the origin of the world and we have God's people, together, migrating from the East when at least a group of them, decide that lest they be scattered around the face of the earth, (which was actually their God-given charge,) they should make bricks and build a city with a tower to the heavens. God, then, comes down amongst the people, sees the tower, notices the universal language and chooses to act. God confuses the language of the people and then scatters them abroad, over the whole face of the earth. It's an odd story.

Understood only unto itself, as all too often, scripture is, this passage has often been used to suggest that diversity- of language and culture and people and geography- was, in fact, introduced as a consequence- that is, as a divine punishment. Which suggests that the story of God's people was intended to be monolithic- mono-cultural, mono-lingual. And that diversity was, in fact, an after-thought- a brokenness- a deviation from the design.

And so, then, the story of the Tower of Babel is often paired with the story we heard from Acts this morning- the story of Pentecost- one where the Spirit breathes into the room Her tongues of fire, setting ablaze the spirits of a people afraid who, full of new life are able to speak in every language there are ears to hear. And that story, the Pentecost story, is read as the correction, or addendum or the completion to the story of the Tower of Babel.

And while I would never suggest that there is only one way to understand and to believe and to live these sacred texts, I do wonder if, perhaps, that reading discounts something fundamental about God's creative design and Her purposes for that design- from the very beginning- a purpose we, in times such as these, may be the difference between life and death.

And so I wonder this morning, if we might go back- back to what we're told is the very beginning-
back to when the Spirit of God danced over the face of the deep- whispering life into the void-
back to the God who created with wonder and without restraint- to the God who delighted in the particular-

in the light and in the darkness-

in the swimming things and the creeping things-

in the flowering things and the flying things-

who both contained and set free-

who molded us out of earth and breathed into us the very breath that formed the world and all that is therein.

To the God who time and time again charged Her people to go to the ends of the earth, bearing fruit, and multiplying- who came very close to Her children calling them out- reminding them of who they are and whose they are-

The God of Genesis, our God, set forth our mission from the first breath sighed into the void- Go- live-tend-listen-multiply.

God delighted in the diversity of God's creation from the very beginning- charging that creation, just two chapters before, to do the same- charging us to do the same.

And yet, how easy it is to forget- to be afraid- to hide ourselves from one another and from the God who delights in our very beings.

And so the people of the earth, descendants of Noah, come upon Shinar in the midst of following God's charge to spread to the ends of the earth. And, because it is always too easy to be afraid of what we do not know, they decide to build a city- a city out of the very bricks they will one day, in the future, be forced to make in Egypt- for Pharaoh- before God, once again, reminds her people that theirs is a God who promises liberation.

Speaking the one language they have, they begin to build a tower, rooting themselves in their fear- building walls to contain their call- forgetting they were filled with the Spirit's breath.

And then, once again, God came close to her people, whispering the truth they had chosen to forget- "yours is not a life to be contained," she said, before once again sending them out, this time introducing languages as a reminder and as a new reality- "Go" the Spirit breathed- "it will take all of you."

And then, many generations later, when once again, God's people were gathered together in an upper room- huddled and afraid- that same Spirit blew in like a rush of wind-

the same wind that swept over the face of the deep,
that breathed life into the void,
that parted the seas-
that same wind came once again to enliven Her people.

Tongues of fire rested on their heads- fire from the bush burning and yet not consumed- fire from the whirlwind that burned through the night- fire that burned in the bellies of the prophets- and suddenly, once again, the Spirit blessed every language with understanding- every nation with a call- every people with a promise
And not everyone understood- some believed it must be drunkenness- that God couldn't possibly be bigger than their own imagination. And perhaps we can understand that also- because there are still those who imagine a God small enough to understand, a God whose worldview mirrors their own, a God who always comforts and never challenges, a God who needs to be contained, protected.

Sometimes even I wish for that.

Sometimes it feels all too easy to get comfortable with a God who wills me to be comfortable- with a God who votes like me and looks like me and talks like me- with a God who will not ask of me more than I can imagine- who answers prayers like magic wishes, who is uncomfortable with the same people with whom I am uncomfortable- a God who is no larger than I can imagine- and who, in fact, is small enough to contain conveniently.

And yet, I know, deep in my own place of knowing, that God has always been bigger than that- that God's mission has always needed and demanded us all- even those who do not fit into my narrow frames- especially those who do not fit into my narrow frames.

What if the story of the Tower of Babel were not a story explaining diversity of language, expression, and culture as Divine punishment, but instead a story rooting that diversity inextricably to God's mission.

Because then, the story of that first Pentecost wouldn't need to serve as a reversal, but rather as a further affirmation- a continued blessing- another reminder, because it is so easy to forget- that sameness has never been God's plan- that, in fact, it has and does and will take us all- in every particularity.

Today we, with the whole church, universal, celebrate the feast of Pentecost the feast of Spirit and breath and fire- of commissioning and of call— and we celebrate it not because it was an amazing moment that happened once though that can also be true.

We celebrate it because that same Spirit who blew through through the room where the first disciples gathered together continues to breathe into our weary bodies- continues to call us out of ourselves-

out of out fear,

out of out small-mindedness,

out of our concern with control.

That same Spirit who hovered over the waters still hovers over these waters-

still breathes life into this world-

still lights a fire in our hearts and in our bellies-

a fire that burns bright for God's justice that speaks truth, even when it's uncomfortable,

a fire that calls out to us from one another as a reminder that this blessing- that God's blessing is for us all, even, and especially, when that feels like an inconvenient truth.

Poet and author, Jan Richardson writes about Pentecost,

*thinking you can carry it
on your own.*

*Here's one thing
you must understand
about this blessing:
it is not
for you alone.*

*It is stubborn
about this.
Do not even try
to lay hold of it
if you are by yourself,*

*To bear this blessing,
you must first take yourself
to a place where everyone
does not look like you
or think like you,
a place where they do not
believe precisely as you believe,
where their thoughts
and ideas and gestures
are not exact echoes
of your own.*

*Bring your sorrow.
Bring your grief.
Bring your fear.
Bring your weariness,
your pain,
your disgust at how broken
the world is,
how fractured,
how fragmented
by its fighting,
its wars,
its hungers,
its penchant for power,
its ceaseless repetition
of the history it refuses
to rise above.*

*I will not tell you
this blessing will fix all that.*

*But in the place
where you have gathered,
wait.
Watch.
Listen.
Lay aside your inability
to be surprised,*

*your resistance to what you
do not understand.
See then whether this blessing
turns to flame on your tongue,
sets you to speaking
what you cannot fathom*

*or opens your ear
to a language
beyond your imagining
that comes as a knowing
in your bones,
a clarity
in your heart
that tells you*

*this is the reason
we were made:
for this ache
that finally opens us,*

*for this struggle,
this grace
that scorches us
toward one another
and into
the blazing day.*

Today, on the feast of Pentecost, we remember that we are not called and commissioned to go it alone- that the winds of that wily Spirit are always before us, always beckoning us into that new day- together- always together- into that new day- into it's every particularity- in it's every language- it's every cultural expression- because that has always been God's design. Even if it has not always been ours.

"Do you think it's possible to change the world," she asked me, eyes full of wonder and anticipation as we stood in line to get lunch. She was 8.

"Do you," I asked in return- my standard stalling tactic.

She furrowed her eyebrows- typical when I didn't answer the question she wanted me to answer.

“I think we can,” she said after a moment- “but that it probably means we need to ask one another for a lot of help- even from people we don’t actually know- maybe even that we don’t like.”

“I think you’re right,” I quietly replied. “I hope you’re right.”

“Me too,” she nodded. And then scooped Mac and cheese on her plate before turning her attention to a conversation going on ahead of us.

I still think she’s right. And I still hope she’s right.

And if, in fact, beloveds, as Jan Richardson writes, this is the reason we were made- the ache that finally opens us up, then as we gather here today and all the todays hereafter- may the Spirit’s breath call you, call me, call us out into the unknown- to a people we do not recognize, to a future we cannot fathom and to a world brought alive because we are alive- full of the Spirit’s breath- filled with the fire of life- blazing into a new day.