

Of Wind and Fire  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
May 23, 2010  
PENTECOST

Genesis 11:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its tops in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." <sup>5</sup> The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the mortals had built. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-21

(NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in

the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup> "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved..'

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## The Sermon

Today we observe the Day of Pentecost, and our lectionary texts wrestle with the great issues of whether the God we proclaim to serve intends for God's people (Meaning everyone!) to live in one place, speak one language, all think alike, etc., or be dispersed throughout the world, reflect in skin color, diet, language, apparel, and behavior unity or diversity.

It is, of course, not only a question for people of faith, but a significant focus of our politics at this point in this nation and throughout the world.

It came home to roost for me recently when I was driving to church one morning following a vehicle with a bumper sticker which read, "I shouldn't have to press 1 to get English."

The current focus is, of course, on Hispanics, and others of non-Caucasian origin, but I'm mindful that in 1946 – when our family moved from a Swedish neighborhood in Chicago to a Swedish community in California – having someone in your shop or market who could translate from Swedish to English was vital for your economic survival.

I'm also mindful that in just the three years we lived on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula prior to moving here last summer, the number of stores and restaurants with se habla espanol signs in their windows had increased appreciably. In short, in that depressed economy, getting Spanish-speaking customers in your door and buying what you had to offer, was the difference between staying in business or hanging up a "Going Out of Business" sign in your window.

So the issue of unity versus diversity is alive and well in 2010, as it was when Genesis chapter 11 was drafted at some point early in the development of the Torah, and when the writer we know as Luke penned the Acts of the Apostles sometime late in the first century A.D.

You certainly know the issue well here in North Idaho, where some of you bear the emotional scars of standing up and saying loudly and clearly that you did not

believe, and were not willing to tolerate, a gospel that proclaimed that God especially (and maybe even exclusively) loved white folk – i.e., Aryans – and the rest of humanity could go to hell literally and figuratively.

You may well be thinking, “Wait a minute, Pastor. What has the Aryan Nations controversy, or the issues of immigration and multi-ethnicity have to do with today’s texts and our spiritual and organizational needs here at Coeur d’Alene First Presbyterian Church?”

An awful lot, actually.

Let me phrase it this way.

“Is CDA First PC Babel-onian, or are we Pentecostal?”

Now I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking,

“Pastor Bill, you are dragging us kicking and screaming into being more Presbyterian, and now you are asking us if we are Babel-like or Pentecostal-like?”

Exactly!

I say exactly, because I believe the Genesis text compared and contrasted to the text from Acts, confronts us with the issue of whether this congregation is more concerned with “making a name for ourselves” (i.e., Babel-like); or insuring that those who come to us from whatever background, ethnicity, socio-economic standing, age, level of education, or whatever can, indeed, hear the good news of the Gospel of God expressed uniquely through Jesus Christ in their own languages.

You see, to be truly Pentecostal Christians does not mean to have the gift of tongues if that means speaking in an incomprehensible manner.

It means being willing to be open to the Spirit of God speaking through each of us in ways we may hardly be able to recognize, but that the world is yearning and starving to hear.

The message of Pentecost is not a message of church growth.

The first birthday of the Church of Jesus Christ was not about a location – i.e., Jerusalem – other than as the context of a Jewish Feast (not a Christian one) that brought faithful Jews from all over the then-known world as an expression of their faith.

The birthday of the Church of Jesus Christ does include reference to numbers – a fantastic number – 3,000 hearing the Gospel and converting to the faith (this was kind of like the first Billy Graham crusade) <g>; but they didn’t all move to one place to worship in one church. They heard the Gospel in such clear terms, that they could take that message with them back to whatever country they lived in, and share it in whatever language was native to them.

Wow!

So, what does a Pentecost-al church look like?

Not a lot different than what CDA First PC looks like. For example:

- Supporting Family Promise, and hosting Family Promise families here for a week in residence is “speaking the Gospel” in the language of the people, even (or especially) without words;
- Hosting the weekly ecumenical meal on Thursdays is “speaking the Gospel” in the language of the people, even (or especially) without words;
- Having a clothing bank, and supporting St. Vincent de Paul’s many services is “speaking the Gospel” in the language of the people, even (or especially) without words;
- Supporting the various mission projects to build wells, to serve the medical needs, to share cups of clean water, and meet basic needs is being Pentecost-al;
- Active Christ Care groups that permit folk to share in learning the Scriptures, and in sharing how God is at work in their lives is being Pentecostal;
- Engaging in the interim process of discerning who God is calling this particular congregation to be and become – especially but not only through the gifts of the pastor you’ll be calling – is Pentecost-al;
- Hosting and supporting Glory Be preschool is being Pentecost-al;
- Providing fantastic music, and vital worship that shares the goal of being Christ-focused without being rigidly ONE WAY is being Pentecost-al;
- Having the courage to stand up and speak about how God is at work in your life is being Pentecost-al.

Mostly, being Pentecostal means seeking to be fervent prayer, as addressed in the following poem by an unknown author: I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day;

I had so much to accomplish that I didn’t take time to pray.  
Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier became each task.  
“Why doesn’t God help me,” I wondered. He answered: “You didn’t ask.”  
I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on, gray and bleak,  
I wondered why God didn’t show me, He said: “But you didn’t seek.”  
I tried to come into God’s presence; I used all my keys at the lock,  
God gently and lovingly chided: “My child, you didn’t knock.”  
I woke up early this morning and paused before entering the day.  
I had so much to accomplish, that I had to take time to pray.

Amen.