THE FESTIVAL OF PENTECOST
May 15, 2016
10:15 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: From Babel to Pentecost and Beyond!

Sermon Text: Genesis 11:1-9

11 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

5 But the L ORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.

6 The L ORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

8 So the L ORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the L ORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the L ORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.
Imagine how good it would’ve felt to disembark Noah’s ark in the mountains of Armenia after more than a year of being cooped up with seven family members and two of every kind of animal on earth and to hear God—who’d spared the lot of you—make this everlasting oath: “Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth”; to see Him hang a multi-hued rainbow in the sky as a sign that He’d honor that pledge for generations to come; to watch nature renew, plants and animals increasing and filling the freshly-scrubbed planet with their bio-diversity. What would you’ve thought if you’d been one of Noah’s three sons—Shem, Ham and Japheth—or their wives when God charged you as He did Adam and Eve in Eden, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth”?

How long after God gave Noah’s sons that charge did the events of our text occur? There would’ve had to be ample time for the mass migration as well as adequate people-power to erect an enduring city with “a tower that reaches to the heavens.” Using the genealogy from later in Genesis Ch. 11, it seems that the events likely happened about two centuries after the Ark came to rest. We’re told, “As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.” Where is Shinar? Most respected historians put it in the fertile plain flanked by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in present-day Iraq. In ancient Hebrew “Shinar” means “country of two rivers.” It might’ve been the name by which the Jews originally knew the lower Mesopotamian country where their forefather, Abram, was born and raised.

The fertile soil of the “plain of Shinar” was so enticing that the nomads decided to settle there permanently. Quite likely Ham’s grandson, Nimrod, led this unruly lot. The Bible calls him “a mighty warrior on the earth” (Gen. 10:8). His name means “Rebel.” His chief aim was to defy God and the command He’d given to Noah’s sons to “fill the earth.” Nimrod was a haughty God-hater, as were the people he led. “They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”

How different are we? We bend over backwards to make a name for ourselves. We boast and brag. We interrupt others to blurt out our latest success or tell a tall tale to top the yarn they’re spinning. How unlike Jesus! After James and John requested the seats of honor flanking His heavenly throne, Jesus decided that all of The Twelve could use a lesson on humble service in His kingdom. He told them, “You know that those who are regarded as
rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42b-45).

Like Nimrod and his clan, like James and John, we always seek what’s in our own best interests. We’re greedy, selfish, egocentric, thoughtless and loveless! That’s who we are by nature. But it’s not who we are in Christ! St. Paul wrote in 1st Cor.: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:9b-11). We’re cleared of all wrongdoing in God’s courtroom thru Spirit-worked faith in Jesus! As God’s adopted children, we long to serve Jesus out of gratitude for all He’s done, and still does, for us! He lives to intercede for us and works everything out for our good.

How did God deal with the insurrection of His headstrong subjects? We’re told, “The LORD came down to see the city and the tower [they] were building,” not because He had to do an on-site inspection in order to ascertain the nature of their rebellion, but because He was getting ready to act graciously in behalf of His fallen creatures much as He did in Eden post-fall. The LORD knew that if they finished their building project, there’d be no end to what they could accomplish by way of rebelling against Him. He’d be right back at square one like He was before the flood. Only this time, He might be inclined to wipe mankind out for good. And He didn’t want to do that.

So the Triune God—who described Himself to Moses as “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6)—hit on a plan so marvelous that only He could’ve conceived of it in order to prevent that terrible outcome: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” Notice the plural usage of the personal pronoun: “let us go down.” He used that identical form when He was about to set the human race in place as the crown jewel of creation. “Let us make man in our image,” He stated. As vital as it was for humans to be created as perfectly moral beings, it was equally imperative that the building project at Babel be stopped in its tracks so that our fallen human race didn’t erect irreconcilable differences between us and God—differences that could’ve caused Him to renege on His promise to send a Savior from sin, if it were possible for that to happen with a God who does not lie.

It was pure grace that moved God to effectively disrupt the lines of communication between human beings so that their building project at Babel failed. We’re told that God “scattered
them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” God achieves His will not because of us but despite us.

If obstinate sinners like us won’t live life on His terms, we force His hand. That’s precisely what happened at Babel: Nimrod and his nomads compelled God to act.

The blessings of Babel weren’t fully realized until Pentecost’s miraculous events! The confusion of languages at Babel helps us appreciate the miraculous events on the Festival of Pentecost described in Acts 2. For example, Jewish people who spoke various languages would’ve gathered at the temple courts to make their offering and repeat the recitation in Hebrew—a language many of them did not speak or even understand, much like happened for centuries in the Roman Catholic Church when the Mass was said in Latin—a language that had become nothing more than a “liturgical” language used only in worship but not in everyday life by anyone—even the priests! Babel strikes again! The frustration of not knowing how to speak or understand someone else’s language still divides people today. It would’ve been nice to know Spanish when we were visiting Nathan in Central America. But even more so when a women called the church and asked if I could speak Spanish. Sadly, not well enough to converse with her.

The miraculous gift of tongues is proof that “God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4) not just Hebrew speakers. This use of foreign language was a sign to the Jewish people, who’d failed to heed God’s prophets’ call to reach out to their pagan neighbors, urging them to repent and put their faith in the coming Messiah. But on Pentecost, they heard the first Jewish Christian converts “declaring the wonders of God in [their] own tongues! Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” proving that they were not only curious Jews but budding 1st c. Lutheran catechumens too! They heard these Spirit-filled believers declare the gospel of Jesus Christ in their native tongues! Peter’s subsequent sermon culminates in a sacred rite of spiritual renewal: “Those who accepted his message”—purely by the Spirit’s power—“were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41).

On Pentecost, God bulldozed the language barrier He’d established at the tower of Babel thousands of years earlier. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news about who Jesus is and how much He loves us despite our sins—is God’s universal language. It crosses social, economic and ethnic lines. It breaks down cultural fences, uniting people from “every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev. 7:9) into one glorious, Spirit-filled family of faith who’ll spend eternity “before the throne” of God and “before the Lamb” of God “who takes away
the sins of the world” (ibid, John 1:29). Truly “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world”—and their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles too! Yes, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). What amazing love!

No matter who you are, what you’ve done or where you hail from, God loves you just as much as He does the next person—no more and no less. The folks in God’s family are far more alike than they are different: 100% sinful by nature and yet 100% forgiven in Christ Jesus! So testify to that saving truth, brothers and sisters. Testify to that truth, so that the miracle of Pentecost may continue unabated. Amen!