



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“All In One Place”

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Acts 2:1-21

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We can't really understand the story of Pentecost without first knowing the story of the Tower of Babel (babble). Or is it the Tower of Babel (bay-bel)? There's no consensus among scholars or linguists for how to pronounce that ancient Akkadian name. The word itself means “confusion,” and the wordplay, particularly in English, adds another level of meaning. I learned it in Sunday school as “babble,” so that's the way I'm going to pronounce it today. I hope that isn't too distracting.

Then again, we can't really understand the story of the Tower of Babel without first knowing the story of Noah's family after the flood. So, let's go all the way back to Genesis 9:1. “God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fertile, multiply, and fill the earth.’” Pretty simple assignment. And all apparently went fine for a couple of chapters and several generations. But then we come to chapter 11. The people picked a place they liked and decided to stay there. They made bricks and built a city where everyone could live, with walls around it and a tower reaching high into the sky. Instead of “filling the earth,” they contented themselves with the familiar and the known. Instead of branching out and becoming unique people from different places with different cultures, they opted for the safety and security of sameness. Instead of exploring the world God created, they settled for watching it from a distant tower.

As the story is told, God decided to drop in one day to see how things were going. Dismayed by the people brazenly disregarding their charge, God mixed up their words so they wouldn't understand each other's languages, then scattered them throughout the earth. It was the only way God could get them to do what they were supposed to do in the first place.

Fast-forward thousands of years to Jerusalem in the early first century CE. Because it was during the Festival of Shavuot, later known as Pentecost, people from all over the Middle East were in the city. Jesus's followers were there, too, having been instructed by the Risen Christ to remain in Jerusalem until they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were all in one place. Suddenly, a sound like a rushing wind filled the house and something that looked like tongues of flame alighted on each of them. The Holy Spirit had arrived, filling them with power and life, and causing them to prophesy and preach in languages they did not know.

But other people knew the languages. Visitors from all around the Middle East heard the words they were saying and recognized them as their own tongue. They were shocked. How could it be that a house full of Galileans could know so many different languages and all break out into proclamation at the same time? It was the miracle that birthed the church.

When I was 21, I went on a choir tour in Europe. It was an eye-opening experience for a small-town kid from southeast Ohio whose only previous international travel had been to Niagara Falls. The itinerary took us through Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Slovakia, Luxembourg, and Lichtenstein. It was an amazing trip, and it stretched my knowledge and worldview. We had considerable time between concerts to explore the places we visited. I knew only a few words in German, even fewer in French. My foreign language experience was limited to two years of high school Spanish, which was no help at all. Before the trip, I learned a few important words and phrases, things like left and right, a handful of numbers, and how to ask where the bathrooms were. But most of the time, the words spoken around me were just sound: the music of the language familiar but the meaning a mystery. Every interaction was hard work. Then one day, in a crowd of people, I heard English being spoken. American English, at that. It was like a homing beacon, drawing me in. I could feel my muscles relax and my mind ease. I could talk to them and just be myself. And it felt a little like home.

I wonder if that was at all what the people in Jerusalem felt like on that Day of Pentecost. How long had they been in the city, fumbling with directions, struggling to haggle in the marketplace, excited by the unfamiliar setting but exhausted by the effort? When they heard voices coming from that house, did their ears perk up, their shoulders drop an inch or two? Recognizing the language as their own, did the message become more effective?

Some have suggested that Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. But I don't think that's right. At Babel, one language became many; to undo it would be to make them all the same. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit didn't transform all those languages into one; it enabled the followers of Jesus to speak in all the languages of the people for whom the message was intended. God didn't draw diverse people back into uniformity and safety; God sent the faithful out on an adventure to take the message of Christ into the world. If anything, this was taking the Babel to the next level. Only this time, instead of leading to confusion, the language took the saving message of Christ to the ends of the earth.

When the Day of Pentecost began, "they were all together in one place." Jesus had given them clear instructions to stay together so they could all receive the Holy Spirit. But the intent was never for them to stay in one place forever. The design was and always has been to go out into the world, proclaiming Christ and the life he came to offer.

Friends, we have not been "all in one place" for quite some time now. That's been true physically the last two years as the pandemic has forced us apart and created hesitancy about returning. But we've allowed other things to keep us apart, too, and for much longer than COVID – ideology, politics, fear of change, lack of vision. With all the things in the world that are keeping us apart – the roller coaster of COVID numbers, the assault on democracy and human rights, the breakdown of community engagement, social media algorithms, even divisions within the church, it is countercultural to expect people to come together. But that's exactly what scripture calls us to do. It's time to come together – not to separate ourselves from the world, but so that we can receive the Holy Spirit in order to re-engage with the world, bringing hope and purpose in the midst of chaos. Without the Spirit, we're just a group of people trying to do the best we can as individuals. *With* the Spirit, we are God's sacred instrument to transform the world through Christ.

The Communion Table is the place we meet this morning – where we come together, where we participate in God's salvation story, where we remember Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and where the Holy Spirit is once again poured out upon us and upon the bread and cup. The Trinitarian God bears witness that unity is not achieved through uniformity, but through communion – *a common bond*. God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and at the same time *one God* invites us to experience the joy of unity in difference. We are not all the same; yet we are one in Christ. Each with our own gifts, our own language, our own experiences, our own circles of connection, can expand our collective understanding and our vocabulary to share the Gospel. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Pentecost is sometimes called "the birthday of the church." Maybe it's better to think of it as the day the Holy Spirit moved the church out of its seats and into the world. My prayer for us today is that we will come together, that we will be filled the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit will move so powerfully in us that we are compelled to go – to go with deepened resolve and holy fire – to share the Gospel and bring hope to a hurting world. May it be so. Amen.