Pentecost

May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21

In the eleventh chapter of Genesis, we hear the story of people who decide to build a ziggurat — a stepped pyramid-type structure. They want to make sure their names will go down in history.

Archeologists tell us these buildings had shrines to the local deities at the top. If you’re inclined to think of your god as living in the heavens above, it makes some sense to want to put a temple to that deity as high up as you can get it. And if you manage to build something that impressive, people will remember you.

But God sees these efforts in a less favorable way. The people were placing too much reliance on technology, were too interested in their own glory. So God confused their languages — the people suddenly spoke different languages and couldn’t understand each other anymore. And God scattered the people across the earth.

It’s sometimes said that Pentecost is the undoing of the Tower of Babel, but that’s not what happens at all. If it was, then all people on earth would speak the same language. There would no longer be a language barrier keeping us from understanding each other.

That’s not what happens at Pentecost. Instead, what happens is that the disciples suddenly have the gifts they’re going to need to be able to carry out the work Jesus gave them — going out into all the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ and baptizing people everywhere.

The Pentecost miracle isn’t that people suddenly hear the disciples speaking in Aramaic or Hebrew and understand it as if it’s miraculously translated in their heads.

The miracle is the disciples each being given fluency in a new language. Which meant they could actually go out into the world and communicate with the people they were sent to serve.

Pentecost is all about remembering that God meets us where we are, provides what we need to thrive as the people God created us to be, and equips us to share God’s love with the world.

And that starts well before the event we celebrate today.

Long before Jesus’ time on earth, Pentecost was a festival celebrating the first grain harvest of the year. The people gave thanks for a harvest that allowed them to have sufficient food.

By offering to God a portion of the harvest, the people gave thanks to God for providing adequate rain and sunshine so the crops could grow. Together, they remembered that God had created the things they needed to be able to live. And together they demonstrated their trust that God would continue to provide for them.

At some point, Pentecost grew into offering thanks to God for a different kind of gift.

Seven weeks after the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, they arrived at Mt. Sinai. There, God gave them the Ten Commandments and entered into a new covenant with them.

And so, just as the Jewish people celebrate Passover a few days before we celebrate Easter, they celebrate Pentecost, or Shavuot (Sha-voo-oat) a few days before we celebrate Pentecost. They give thanks to God for the gifts that allow them to thrive: the gift of the law that teaches us how to honor God and how to live among each other in a peaceful community. They give thanks to God for being delivered out of slavery. And they give thanks to God for entering into a covenant with them, declaring, “I will be your God and you will be my peoples.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

For us, as Christians, our 7-week celebration of the resurrection of our Lord culminates with Pentecost.

Today, we celebrate the Spirit’s dramatic arrival amongst the disciples. As we hear in the Gospel text for today, Jesus’ ascension allows room for the Spirit to come and serve as Advocate, Comforter, Companion, and Teacher.

Once again, God provides for the people where they are, with gifts that allow them to thrive.

The gifts the Spirit gave to the disciples allowed them to better share the good news of Christ with those around them.

Through the gifts of discernment and speaking and teaching, Peter was able to quote the prophet Joel. What had been promised was what had just happened — God poured out upon the people God’s Spirit.

And the Spirit dramatically equipped Jesus’ followers to share the good news of Christ with others, giving them the gift of being able to speak a different language.

With these gifts, the disciples were able to share the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, and carry out the work given to them by Jesus before his ascension.

Throughout all time, Pentecost is about reminding us to see how God provides for us. And the gifts God gives us are never solely for our own benefit.

The Spirit begins with the gift of faith, which helps us trust the promises of salvation and grace and mercy.

From there, the Spirit equips us to continue the work that Jesus did during his time on earth — welcoming the stranger, comforting those who mourn, accompanying those who are sick and lonely, and sharing God’s love with everyone.

Whatever form our gifts take, each of us is given a unique set of gifts by the God who created each of us to be unique individuals.

If Pentecost was an overturning of the Tower of Babel, it’d be as if God was saying that God’s intention for us was to all think the same, speak the same, have the same understanding of the world around us.

Instead, God validates our differences by giving each of us a unique set of gifts, creating each of us individually and calling us a beloved child.

The gifts the Spirit gives us bear fruit — peace, joy, love, kindness, self-control, faithfulness, patience, gentleness, and generosity. It is through these that we grow in our ability to understand our neighbor, even when there seem to be insurmountable barriers between us.

Each of us has a different role to play and different gifts to offer, thanks to the Spirit that equips and guides us.

But each of us has the same calling in the world — sharing the peace and hope and love of God with others, and lifting up our thanks to the God who provides for our needs and calls us beloved.

1. Exodus 6:6-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)