

*Gary Harder, May 19, 2013 (Pentecost)*

**“From Babel to Pentecost”**

**Texts: Genesis 11:1-9**

**Luke 24:44-53**

**Acts 2:1-13**

**Introduction**

On this Pentecost Sunday I want to invite you into two Biblical stories. The first one is that profound myth from Genesis 11, the story of the tower of Babel. The second one is that profound experience of the first Christians on the day of Pentecost. These two stories are polar opposites, but they both have to do with the issue of power. The first text is a story about a human community which tries desperately to cling to what is – to the old ways. On the other hand there is a text about a human community where God’s power is at work, expressed through the Holy Spirit, creating something entirely new.

**Babel – Genesis 11**

The story of the tower of Babel is about the temptations but also limits of human power. The story is told so cryptically - with so few words. Huge ideologies are demythologized in sparse strokes.

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”. What is this quest all about?

This story does express deep human longings: for security, for community, for permanence. And maybe also for control, for fame, for empire building, for uniformity, for domination, for bold power over the chaos that always lingers at the edges of life.

Significant to me in this story is that the tower builders are not named as bad or evil or sinful people. They are normal people. They are all people. They are you and me kind of people who have a human inclination to take control and to organize life and to see to our security and

perhaps even to make some kind of a name for ourselves. And soon we exert our power over others, maybe use a little force if necessary, and say we are doing it to preserve our community – we are doing it for the good of human kind.

It is the common and very normal human myth. We can control life and accumulate power and maybe make a name for ourselves in the bargain. The myth is named and tamed in the Babel story. The ultimate result of such tower building is Chaos, confusion, upheaval, and disorientation. Everything goes wrong. Instead of creating community the tower builders experience a scattering individualism. Just when it seemed everything was in their grasp they lose control, loose power, loose security, lose community. And they even lose their common language.

I wonder if today's myth of instant and constant communication via the internet is really creating more community, or is in fact leading to more disintegration. It seems that the more access we have to instant communication the less we are able to really connect deeply to the people we love. (Story of colleague and wedding prep by texting).

## **Luke**

Another story is told though, a story which reverses the chaos of human empire building. The story teller is Luke - Luke the physician. He tells the story of God's power in two volumes. Book one is the Gospel according to Luke. It is the story of Jesus, the one who most clearly showed us what God is like and how God works in our world. The second volume is the book of Acts, the story of the Holy Spirit and the story of the birth of the church.

Book one, the Gospel of Jesus, ends pointing to book two. It ends with the story of the Ascension - that is, the story of Jesus leaving this earth to be with God again. The last words of Jesus to his followers, according to Luke, are these,

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled’. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.””

I want you to notice the gift that Jesus gave his followers in farewell. The gift was the promise of power from on high. The gift was not the power, but the promise of power. And the promise was enough. Maybe I quibble too much on a fine point - the promise is not yet the power. But I think the distinction is important. Bear with me.

The disciples will continue their work and their witness with a rather profound sense of personal weakness and fear. But they will be sustained by the promise of power when they most need it. And that will be enough. That will be enough for them to risk their lives going back to Jerusalem. That will be enough for them to go back to the temple – there were the crucifixion of Jesus was engineered - to tell the Jesus story and to worship God with great joy.

The promise of power has to be enough. For you see, if we claim always to have that power from on high, available to us at our beck and call, we will be uncontrollably tempted to build our empires with it - to build more Babel's. When we do what we do, especially working for God, and for the church, and we claim that God is always on our side, that we are always right, and that we act only in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are already abusing God's Spirit, and surely also other people.

The power from on high is not like a garden hose where, once you turn on the water tap, you as gardener are in total control, opening the faucet at will and directing the water at will. If the New Testament teaching on the Holy Spirit teaches us anything it is that the Holy Spirit moves where it wills on its own sovereignty, and is never willed or controlled or directed by us humans – by even the most Christ like humans.

We are promised power from on high; When God wills; When we particularly need it. This power comes like surprising grace never ever to be captured or controlled by us - by the church.

Volume one of Luke's story ends pointing clearly to volume two. Volume one is about Jesus and his followers, and about the promise of power from on high. Book two, Acts, is about the Holy Spirit and the church. It is about the promise fulfilled.

## Acts

Chapter one of Acts reminds the followers of Jesus again to wait. Again they are promised power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

And then in chapter two it happens. Something powerful does happen, and it surprises everyone.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues of, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of the. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Notice that this happened before Peter started preaching. It happened before the disciples did anything. It wasn't engineered by humans. It wasn't unleashed by a great sermon. The disciples of Jesus were not in control. The Spirit came as powerful gift - and the church was born.

And everything that fell apart at the attempt to build the tower of Babel, came together at God's surprising building of human community - the church.

As I read Acts 2 side by side with Genesis 11, I was struck by the contrasts. I was struck by 4 questions.

1) What is it that helps us communicate deeply with each other? In Genesis 11 the people have a common language – and yet are aware inside that they really aren't communicating deeply with each other. Building the tower (the internet) they think, will ensure their togetherness. It will be the big project which will bring them all together. And yet, in the building of it, the people's language is “confused”, and they cannot understand each other's speech. Strange, they start by speaking the same language and yet lose their ability to communicate with each other.

In Acts two, communication is central to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives that diverse crowd with many different languages, the power to communicate with each other. “Now there where devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in

the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’”

All who gathered could understand the Gospel. The Good News becomes understandable. It speaks in the language of all the people. The Spirit of God gives the power to articulate and speak in the language of the people.

Our own- my own- communication is always inadequate. I so often cannot say what I want to say. The preacher stumbles and mumbles at best, the tongue and the language often a barrier to real communication.

But the Holy Spirit comes with the power of communication so that the Good News becomes clear and available, regardless of the language or culture or location of the hearer. And that is the miracle that astounds everyone gathered in that place in Jerusalem. I trust that here to at MFM, even as our languages become more diverse, the Holy Spirit will empower us to communicate ever more deeply with each other.

- 2) Who has the power? Is the power only for leaders, or is it for everyone? Genesis 11 only hints at the fact that in building a huge tower into the heavens you have to have bosses and you have to have servants - or slaves. It was the leaders of the people who envisioned and planned the tower building. The “Let us” language of Genesis 11 is royal language. The “us” is the leaders.

In the Pentecost story the Holy Spirit falls on everyone gathered, not only on the leaders. Here suddenly everything is burst open. First of all the text says that “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” And then Peter preaches a new vision, based on a quotation from an older vision of the prophet Joel. “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 will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy...”

God gives gifts to everyone. Young and old, male and female, slave and free, all are given gifts to lead. All are touched by the Spirit of God. Not only masters, or older males, or

the educated, or the upper classes, or the right blood lines, or the right color of skin. God's Spirit can never be contained or controlled, and is poured out lavishly on all.

- 3) Do we fear change, or are we open to change? Do we desperately hold fast to the old, or are we open to the new thing God is inviting us into?

The tower builders of Genesis 11 didn't want anything to change. They wanted desperately to preserve what was, to root it in stone, to guarantee preservation, not change. The tower would be the guarantee that the old ways, the old power structures, the old traditions, even the old language would be preserved forever. And, in that resistance to change they lose everything they were trying to cling to.

The Holy Spirit inspires a different agenda. Acts 2 records Peter preaching a powerful sermon. It is the story of God working through the ages, and working particularly in Jesus. "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promises of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear...Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'What should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ...'"

Repent. The word repent means change directions. Take a new path. Don't stay in old, unproductive, go nowhere ruts. The Holy Spirit brings the power to change, to be caught up in the God movement, to live in a new way. And to symbolize this change, be baptized, join the God movement, show that you have a new goal in life, a new ultimate loyalty, a new spirit of love. The Holy Spirit brings change and brings the power to change.

- 4) How do we build community? The tower builders of Genesis 11 too sought community. They desperately sought community. "Otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth", they cry in alarm. The deep irony is that in the building of the tower it is exactly that sense of community that they lost. "So the Lord

scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth.”

In contrast, listen to the end of Acts 2. “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spend much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The Holy Spirit gave them the power to create community – a very genuine and deep seated community. In fact, they experienced an unbelievably profound sense of community – a profound sense of belonging to Christ and to each other.

## **Conclusion**

The promise of the end of the Gospel of Luke that power from on high would come has been fulfilled. Pentecost is a marvelous, incredible happening, a fulfillment beyond expectation. They have received the gift of power to communicate. This power has come on all who are gathered, not only on selected leaders. This power created an opportunity for huge change. And it created a wonderful community.

But the power from on high came as gift, not as possession. The day is over, and the people are still human. The power isn't permanently there on the followers of Jesus. Peter stumbles on in weakness. Paul will complain about his thorn in the flesh (and he will totally misjudge John called Mark). The church will struggle with many difficult decisions and many conflicts, and will often mess up big time. Why, right after Pentecost a Greek speaking contingent will complain that their widows are being overlooked in the distribution of food, hints of racism in that wonderful community.

You just can't control or tame or domesticate the Spirit of God. We come back to the promise. “You will receive power when you most need it”. But you will not be in control of that power. The Spirit is. You can't turn the tap on at your whim. When power comes it is a gift.

Many times, throughout the book of Acts, the power does come, and marvelous things

happen. But in-between the church always wrestles with the temptation to build towers of Babel rather than communities of the Spirit.

When I was baptized I was finally at peace with God, with myself, with my world. Baptism was like a Pentecost. My wrestling's with faith were stilled for the while. I felt both a calmness and a power. The promise was fulfilled.

But neither calmness nor power were permanent possessions. The holy glow of baptism was followed by some other wildernesses of faith, times of disillusionment, struggles of faith, feeling empty and very, very powerless.

But there have always been times when the Holy Spirit blows refreshing wind or renewing fire on embers that want to die, and in unexpected times and unexpected ways comes a gift of power which is surely not my own.

So too with ordination. Again a very pure and holy moment, when the struggles with calling and gifts and vocation are silenced and vision and future become one clear, burning, focused call and commitment. There was a strong sense of peace and of power, the laying on of praying hands a beautiful, uplifting thing.

And then one stumbles on in ministry, so often in total weakness, vision blurred, feeling so empty in the face of a ministry challenge. If only we could control the Spirit's power.

But we can't. But the promise remains. And it is enough. Wait. Power will come. And usually when it comes it startles us. The power of the Holy Spirit is a reality, but it is not ours to control, finding its own mysterious time and place to surprise us. But every once in a while comes a moment, often a weak moment, when it seems as if there is a holy fire present, a life-giving wind, a power not our own, a gift beyond our imagining, and Pentecost happens all over again.

But till then we wait, expectantly, trustingly, the promise Jesus left in farewell, the promise of power from on high.

And that will be enough. "Holy Spirit moments"

Prayer

Story of our august lament Sunday – worst worship service of my life

Story of Rayleen's funeral