

The Power of Words

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-4

The Lectionary is a listing of biblical passages for each Sunday—each day, actually—on which the Church is meant to focus. In reality, several lectionaries exist. The Roman Catholics have one, the Lutherans another. Presbyterian preachers use the Common Lectionary, shared by many denominations. I have preached about forty-eight Sundays per year since 1990. I started preaching, a few Sundays a year, in 1982. In all those years, across an estimated 1,675 sermons delivered, I have gone back and forth between preaching straight through a book of the Bible without reference to the Lectionary, and following it. Today, and indeed for all of 2022 so far, I have followed it. And today, it has presented us with a problem. What do we do with an Old Testament passage in which God limits human beings' ability to understand each other, and a New Testament passage in which God empowers it?

Genesis 11 belongs to a part of that book called "prehistory". The creation narrative and the Noah saga also fit in here, where events happen without reference to linear time. To critical scholars it has seemed, since at least the mid 19th century, that the writers of these chapters never meant them to be taken literally. Like so much ancient literature, these words do not attempt to present objective history. Instead, they comment on reality. They dramatize and attempt to explain human nature, the meaning of life, and other deep topics. In our case, the author of Genesis 11 finds a

theological explanation for the fact that human societies evolve in different places with different languages. Why do the Persians speak Farsi, the Syrians, Arabic and the Hebrews, Hebrew? Because God wanted to confound the hubris of humanity.

If all human beings everywhere could understand each other, what powers might they arrogate to themselves? If you think this is a flimsy excuse for God making an arbitrary decision, consider the heated debates happening right now about what Twitter will permit on its platform. People get very angry—and rightly so—about what other people can and cannot say online. Controlling the discourse, the conversation, goes a long way toward controlling the shape of things. We have long agreed that we cannot shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater. Can you make racist comments on Instagram? Can I advocate for Nazi ideology on Facebook? Where is the line? Words have power. Who wields that power, and how, matters.

The words of Genesis 11 raise a number of questions we lack the time to address today. Among them are, why does the Lord speak in the first-person plural? And, How accurate is the comment about “migrating from the east?” (Spoiler alert: fairly accurate.) But we need to focus on the central theme of this passage, that God felt the need to divide humanity linguistically in order to maintain order. Words do have power. I believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of scripture. I believe God had a point in causing Genesis 11 to be written. What is that point? I believe it is to show that God cares about what and how we communicate. God endorses godly communication. God restricts ungodly communication. We can babble all we like.

But we may not make sense. We may even promote falsehood and destruction.

I once watched two Christian men escalate from a mild disagreement to a shouting match in less than a minute. They had spent the morning working to help build our previous church's second building. Men, women and children surrounded them, some holding remnants of sandwiches provided by our equivalent of the Church Life Commission for a thank you lunch. We were walking out to our vehicles. Another man, a mentor and friend of mine, spoke with me afterwards. Neither of us could remember what started it. It got so hot, so fast, we could remember only its startling intensity. The two men became so enraged so quickly, all I could do in the moment was interpose myself between them to try to prevent a physical altercation. Though my mentor friend and I tried hard to effect a reconciliation neither of the belligerents had any interest. One of them left the church, with his wife. The other repeated the pattern of verbal intimidation, to that church's detriment, for years.

Words have power. The old "sticks and stones" rhyme has it perfectly backward. Words can and do cause terrible damage. But they can also create healing and open paths to life. And that is the Pentecost story. Jerusalem in Jesus' day functioned as the capital of a Roman province, Judea. It therefore harbored native speakers of Hebrew and Latin, but also of Greek, Egyptian, Phoenician, and the dialects of Moab, Ammon, Lebanon, and what we now call Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Day of Pentecost was already a major annual Jewish festival. Starting in days so ancient they go almost as far back as the prehistory segments of Genesis, Pentecost

was a planting celebration. It happened fifty days after Passover, which itself dates back to Exodus. Over the years Pentecost (literally “fifty celebration”) became associated with Moses carrying the tablets of the law down Mt. Sinai.

Pilgrims flooded Jerusalem every Pentecost. It was one of three days each year that a devout Jewish male was supposed to worship in the temple. So when Peter and the other remaining disciples of Jesus preached in the temple courtyard they addressed Jews who spoke a large number of languages. Somehow, the Holy Spirit provided the means for all to understand. And what did they understand? What did God's Spirit wish to get across? Later in Acts 2 we read Peter preaching that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan...of God” to be crucified. “But God raised him up,” Peter continued, speaking Aramaic but being heard in each attendant's native tongue. Eventually he concludes, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Messiah.

The Gospel transcends human division. We can all understand each other. Whatever may separate us, whether language or politics or skin color or whatever, God bridges every gap we create. And the bottom line is this: Jesus died for our sins. Jesus rose from the grave. Jesus prays over us and remains in control. The fires of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's manifestation, testify to this. This church needs to heal some divisions. Our nation certainly does. Thank God the Spirit makes it possible. Let each person hearing these words use words to make it happen.