

Pentecost Sunday | May 24, 2026

Genesis 11:1–9 | Acts 2:1–21

Pentecost Sunday is one of my favorite days in the church calendar. Sure part of that is because this church sanctuary looks really good with red paraments. Yes, part of it is that the day gives me an excuse to light lots of candles. But the main reason I love pentecost so much is the delightful chaos of it all. I tried to liturgically recreate some of the chaos of the original Pentecost this morning. The children came running in with streamers and noisemakers in much the same way that the Spirit would have appeared to the disciples. And right in the middle of all that noise, you and I are asked to sit and listen and discern what the Spirit is doing.

The two scripture passages for today are two stories in scripture where God is depicted as being involved with how a group of people are able to communicate with one another. The church has held these two

stories in conversation for a very long time, usually as mirror images of each other. Babel breaks; Pentecost mends. Babel scatters; Pentecost gathers. Babel confuses our speech; Pentecost makes us all understood again.

But I want to suggest to you this morning that the relationship between these two stories is not actually a relationship of reversal. Pentecost does not undo Babel. Pentecost finishes what God started at Babel. And I think this matters quite a bit for what kind of church we are called to be in our own time.

This story is what scholars call an ediology. It's a story intended to explain why things are the way they are. In this case it's meant as a

myth to explain why there are so many languages among humanity, and why we are so scattered across the earth. Like many stories in the Book of Genesis, things probably didn't happen this way. But the point of the story is not about knowing material history. The point is to talk about something deeper about the condition of humanity. The story of Babel tells us that the people migrated to a plain in the land of Shinar. Shinar is Babylon. It is, in other words, the seat of an empire. The original audience for this story knew Babylon as the empire that had conquered them, deported them, and tried to assimilate them. So when this story opens with humanity gathering in the land of Babylon to build a great city and a great tower, we are not reading an innocent story about an ancient construction project. We are reading a story that tells us how the biblical authors thought something like the Babylonian empire starts.

Listen again to what the builders say. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. Let us make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Three things in that sentence catch my attention.

First: “let us make a name for ourselves.” One of the most profound parts about how Genesis describes the creation of human beings is telling us that God created human beings in God’s own image. That very fact is meant to tell us about who we are and where our value come from. Our value is intrinsic to our very being and our name has already been made, even before the foundations of creation were laid. As image bearers of God, we do not need to construct vanity projects and spectacles to give ourselves a name and value. God has already named and valued us, and our creative endeavors should flow from that.

Second: “otherwise we shall be scattered.” But scattering was the whole point. God’s first command to humanity, all the way back in Genesis 1, was to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. To scatter. To cover the world in human diversity. The builders at Babel are not pursuing God’s vision. They are refusing it. They are saying, we do not want to fill the earth. We want to stay right here, all together, all looking up at the same tower, all in service of the same vanity project. A tower that is built for the singular purpose of being as tall as it can be doesn’t fit with the vocation that humanity was given at our creation. A resource consuming tower does not contribute to the flourishing of life and the stewardship of this planet.

Third: notice what they make. They make bricks. The text dwells on this. “They had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar.” Bricks are not natural building materials. Bricks are uniform. Bricks are pressed into identical molds in order to fit perfectly with every other brick. That's

great for building material, sure. But so often civilisations tend to treat their people and other natural resources as building materials. When you live in a brick civilization, the role of each individual person is to be a brick. Identical. Replaceable. Mortared into a project that is not your own.

So let's reconsider what God is actually doing in this story. I'll be honest, this is a different reading from the one I grew up on. The version I heard in Sunday school was that God comes down to punish humanity for getting too ambitious, for trying to climb up to heaven without permission. But I don't think that's fully what's going on here. What God comes down to scatter is the human project of domination. The project of pressing every soul into the same mold. The project of making a name for ourselves at the cost of bearing the image of God. The confusion of languages at Babel is not God's curse upon human cleverness. It is God's gift of difference. God breaks the brick wall back

into living stones. God sends humanity out across the face of the earth so that we might finally do what we were created to do, which is to be the species of glorious variety, of stewardship and care, we were always meant to be.

So when the next thousand or so years of biblical history unfold, and we see all of these different peoples developing different languages and different cultures and different ways of telling the story of God, that diversity is not a problem that God is trying to fix. That diversity is God's intention, expressed through a scattering.

Now hold that in your mind as we turn to Acts chapter 2.

It is fifty days after the Resurrection. The disciples are gathered in one place in Jerusalem. A sound like the rush of a violent wind fills the house. Tongues as of fire rest on each of them. And they begin to speak.

Listen closely to what the author says here. They begin to speak “in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Other languages, plural.

If Pentecost were the reversal of Babel, if the Spirit’s job were to fix what God had broken, we would expect the opposite miracle from the one we actually get. We would expect the crowd to be given a single divine tongue. A sort of heavenly Esperanto. That is just not what happens.

What happens is that the Spirit becomes polyglot. The Spirit speaks Parthian. The Spirit speaks Median. The Spirit speaks Elamite, Mesopotamian, Cappadocian, Phrygian, Egyptian, Libyan, Cretan, and Arabic. And the miracle for the listeners, the part that astonishes the crowd, is not that they have all suddenly learned Aramaic. The miracle

is that “each of us, in our own native language” hears about God’s deeds of power.

The Spirit at Pentecost does not erase the languages that came out of Babel. The Spirit uses them. The Spirit speaks them. The Spirit declares, by showing up in every mother tongue under heaven, that there is no language too small or too local or too marginalized to bear the news of what God is doing in the world.

This is what I mean when I say Pentecost completes Babel. At Babel, God scatters humanity into difference so that difference could become a blessing. At Pentecost, God demonstrates that difference has become exactly that. The Spirit is not embarrassed by the multiplicity of human tongues. The Spirit speaks fluent Parthian. The Spirit speaks fluent Cappadocian. The Spirit speaks Crow. The Spirit speaks Cheyenne. The Spirit speaks Sioux and Blackfeet. The Spirit speaks the language of our

questioning, the language of our grieving, and the language of our hope.

And here is the thing that ties this whole story together for me. Right before the events of Pentecost, in the opening reading from Acts chapter 1 that we heard at the beginning of this service, the disciples ask Jesus a very particular question. They say, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

I want you to hear that question for what it really is. It is almost exactly the question of Babel. Lord, are you going to restore us to one center? One capital? One consolidated kingdom? Are you going to give us back our tower? And Jesus’s answer is gentle, but it is a no. You will receive power, Jesus says, but it will not be the power you are looking for. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” He is not gathering them inward into a kingdom. He

is sending them outward to bear witness. Pentecost, in some sense, is the answer to the disciples' wrong question. They wanted Babel restored. Jesus gives them Babel completed.

We live, all of us, in a moment when the temptation of Babel is loud and growing louder. The temptation to build, to centralize, to consolidate. The temptation to make a great name for ourselves. The temptation, in our churches and in our nation, to confuse unity with uniformity. To believe that if we could all just speak the same language, vote the same way, sing the same songs, and worship the same God in exactly the same way, then we would finally be the body of Christ.

I have to name a few places I see this happening. I see it in the resurgence of Christian nationalism, which wants to press an entire pluralistic country into one religious mold and call that the Reign of Christ. I see it in the political rhetoric that scapegoats migrants and

trans people and the unhoused and anyone who does not fit the dominant culture. I see it, frankly, in the centuries-long history of indigenous genocide on this very land, that continues to this very day with to federal government's ban on bison grazing on public land.

Pentecost asks us to believe that the Spirit is not embarrassed by our differences. God did not look down at the scattered nations and grieve. The multiplicity of human tongues is not a problem to be solved but a richness to be entered into. Pentecost asks us to imagine a church and a society in which I do not need you to become like me, and you do not need to become like me either, in order for the Spirit to speak truthfully and powerfully through both of us.

So Easter is over. The wind is here. The fire is here. The children have run through this sanctuary with streamers and noisemakers, and they have shown us, better than I can preach, what Pentecost actually looks

like. It looks like many voices. It looks like every direction at once. It looks like joy that has not yet been organized.

Hear the good news. The Spirit of God is poured out on all flesh. On your sons and your daughters and children of any and all gender expressions. On the young who see visions and the old who dream dreams. On those whose voices have been amplified for generations and on those whose voices have been silenced for generations. The Spirit is not a single torch held by a single hand. The Spirit is a fire that divides and rests on every head. The Spirit is a wind that fills the whole house.

So as we leave this place today, let us go as the church of Pentecost. Not the church of the restored tower. Not the church that has finally gotten everyone to speak the same way. Let us go as the church that follows the Spirit out into the world, in all of its glorious scattering. Let us go in

our many tongues, with the breath of God at our backs, to bear witness
to what God is doing among us.

Amen.