

Genesis 11:1-9 From Here to Pennsylvania Street  
Acts 2:1-12  
June 8, 2025

According to one of my Pentecostal friends, Babel and Pentecost are companion stories. In the one, human speech is confused and people are scattered; in the other, speech is miraculously made understandable, making people from all over able to communicate, *thus, hear the gospel news.*

The death and resurrection of Jesus, which at *that* Pentecost celebration was only fifty days previous, is the catalyst of the new era of the Spirit. Since then the message has gone out all over the world.

Of course, times have greatly changed since the days of Jesus. Estimates are that the population of the world at the time of the first Christian Pentecost was about 200 million people. Now there are 8 billion. People in the Mediterranean Basin would not likely have known about civilizations in India, China, or South America, and only marginally in Northern Europe or Sub-Saharan Africa.

Now we have real-time access to people anywhere in the world. At the click of a mouse one can find out anything they want to know about people in any nook or cranny they find interesting. And they can talk to people in real time by audio and video connections. Interestingly, there can be a debate about whether there is a better understanding among people in the present, with all this communications technology, than

in the past, either the time of Babel *or* in the time of that Pentecost. Presently, there seems to be an enhanced sense of separation and mis-communication and mis-understanding, alienation.

Like other aspects of human life, perhaps, “alienation,” is part of the human condition regardless of how well the structures of communication work; how well people are able to connect and communicate over large spaces, language differences, and big gaps in understanding. It can happen between people who are in the same room.

The story in Genesis indicates that the problem at Babel was not that people were failing to communicate, but that they were so good at it that it was causing a different kind of problem. They thought more highly of their capabilities to achieve fulfillment than they ought. They were building a tower to heaven . . . this could refer a real tower and not merely a metaphor, but definitely also serves as a metaphor of all human striving without God. One wonders how tall it was.

Whatever the case, it was not likely to come close to modern-day skyscrapers. They seem very tall when you are on the ground looking up, but they are really not that tall. If the tallest building in the world was laid down end-to-end, it would stretch about a half mile up the road, that is, about two-thirds of the way from here to Pennsylvania Street. One can get higher up by driving up into the mountains.

We now know that there is a narrow band around the earth's surface about four miles thick, in which all physical life that we know about resides. Actually the farthest reaches of microbial life stretches it to about twelve miles, but almost all life happens from about 500 meters under the ocean surface to about 3.75 miles up in the mountains.

In South America there is a city nicknamed, "The Devil's Paradise," about 3.2 miles above sea level, that is the highest human city. Of course, human life is impossible under water. The idea of living outside the earth's atmosphere, in outer space beyond the moon and Mars is still only a science fiction dream.

Think of it, when compared to what we now know about the vast reaches of outer space, we are really still quite earthbound.

How silly they looked trying to build a tower when they had no idea how high the heavens reached. How high could they possibly have believed they were going to go, not knowing the truth about what they were looking at when they looked up at the sky? Human life yet is characterized more by what isn't known, than by what is. And by the human pretension that we know more than we do. This calls for humility.

So the story of Genesis says that God, decided to scatter them *on purpose* to prevent them from their preposterous and arrogant, and fruitless pursuits.

That means that if Pentecost is the reversal of Babel, God has decided it is safe to allow human hubris to resume its ambition. What could possibly be the source of that safety? What changed? We may decide, of course, to reject that idea that Pentecost is meant to be understood as the reversal of Babel. But let us leave that question aside for now.

For now, let us take up the question of the human situation as it relates to the state of our present knowledge, and to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

It has always been part of the human experience to be caught between Babel and Pentecost; between the earthly and the heavenly, between what can be seen and what cannot be seen; between sound and silence, chaos and order; and on the spiritual side of things between arrogance and humility; restlessness and peace; confusion and understanding; self-confidence and doubt; between works and grace, between the earthbound quality of our lives and the desire to reach for the stars.

When Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians that we see through a glass darkly, he was speaking a profound truth, perhaps even more than he knew. We are like travelers on the Niagara River who think that if they can negotiate the shallow rapids or the shiftiness of the river's personality, they would be fine, not knowing about the great falls just ahead. It is *always* true that we are not competent to interpret and negotiate life on our own understanding and on our own authority.

It is also true that the Spirit of God is always with us, and that this presence changes life, from one in which the natural side of things prevails, both in us and among us, to one in which we are enlivened by God's grace. One is not out of bounds to call attention to the miraculous nature that is sometimes seen or felt, of the presence of God.

It is a peace beyond understanding; a perseverance in troubled times when strength has failed; a courage in the face of adversity; a willingness to see the good in others even when they are behaving badly, and to accept forgiveness and grant it to others; a kindness that stands out in the world's unfairnesses and unkindnesses. It is a guidance, a present hope in hopeless situations. We are speaking of the Holy Spirit.

There are not words powerful enough to describe it, thus it has a mysterious quality, yet millions profess to have experienced it. These stories offer us an interpretation of life that rings true in every age. What makes it safe to speak of it in our own times, is the love and grace of God revealed to us in Christ Jesus, through his life . . . and death . . . and resurrection . . . and abiding presence.

Pentecost stands for God having come down to us, when we know that we can't get past the edge of town on our own in our pursuit of God; it stands for the message of the divine approach, and the salvation that accompanies it, which tells us that we are more important to God than we know, and if we listen, will

be more important to each other than we have ever dreamed. The true test of our humanity is not in the magnificence of what we build, but the faith and love that is the response to the Incarnation of Christ, and the arrival of the Spirit,

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