

**“How Are They to Believe in Him of Whom They Have Never Heard?”**

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The story of the Tower of Babel is the last episode of mankind’s fall in Genesis 1-11. After God made all of creation “very good”—including man and woman, and their relationship to each other, nature, and God—Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree so that they could become gods. This sinful action fractured their faithful and blessed relationship with God their Creator. It also brought discord to their marriage and hardship to their efforts to procreate and farm. Because of their disobedience, God exiled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

But the fall of mankind into sin and discord continued. Cain murdered his brother Abel in a jealous rage because God looked favorably upon Abel’s trusting sacrifices. Lamech took two wives instead of the one that God had ordained in creation and unjustly killed people for harming him in minor ways. In time the wicked thoughts and deeds of mankind become so pervasive that God decided to wipe all of mankind off of the earth—save Noah and his family—and start creation over again. But this did not bring mankind back to the “very good” nature that God graciously gave them in creation.

Sin sprung up again when people, who spoke one language, worked as one against God. They built a city and a tower to heaven so that they could make a name for themselves and keep from being spread over the earth. There is more than one sin at play in this story, more than one fall.

In building a city that would keep them in one place the people directly opposed God’s creation command to fill the earth and have loving dominion over all of it. In making a name for themselves they attempted to become the determiners of their own functions and roles in life.

They rejected God's designs laid out for them in creation and, like Adam and Eve, sought to become their own gods. In building a temple to heaven the people either tried to reach up to and control the heavenly realm like God or, more likely, tried to manipulate God. For in the ancient Near East it was common to conceive of mountains as the first place that a god would step down when descending from heaven. It is here, or at temples that are miniature mountains, where the gods were supposed to reside on earth. In making a tower to heaven, then, the people seem to be building a place where God would dwell with them and be beholden to them for the way they have provided for God. This is directly opposed to what happens in creation where God provides everything for mankind, thus placing people in the position of receiving from, trusting in, and obeying God.

In response to these sins, God mockingly stoops down to see what puny plans the people have devised and then easily disperses them by instantly giving them the "gift" of speaking different languages. No longer able to work together as one, they scatter—presumably by language groups. By means of God's law and punishment, the people are forced to fulfill God's command to fill the earth. This, of course, did not change their hearts or faith in God.

In the next chapter of Genesis, God graciously elects Abram and Sarai to be the family through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. It is far beyond the scope of one sermon to trace out the developments of God's salvation history from Genesis 12 to the book of Acts, so we will not. What we need to keep in mind, though, is that God has chosen one family (Abram's) within one language family (Hebrew) to be the receivers and agents of God's blessings.

There might appear to be a "scandal of particularities" in that God favors one group within mankind to the detriment or condemnation of all others. But this is not the case. The Old

Testament contains stories of non-Abrahamic people being included in God's covenantal blessings by virtue of their faith in the God. Think of Rahab the Canaanite prostitute and Ruth the Moabite idolater. Both are incorporated into God's blessings by faith through grace.

At Pentecost, however, God ramps up His missionary activities and overcomes the consequences of sin and Babel. In today's epistle reading from Acts we hear of the twelve apostles celebrating Pentecost together at an undisclosed house in Jerusalem. Pentecost—which is an Old Testament sacred pilgrimage feast, otherwise known as the Feast of Weeks—occurs fifty days after Passover. Originally it celebrated the bounty of God's gracious blessings at the wheat harvest in the spring. Like Passover and the fall Feast of Booths, Israelites were required to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate this sacred feast because this is where God promised to be present with and for His people—namely, at the temple.

Sometime before Christ, Pentecost also become a feast that celebrated God giving the Law to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai. Jewish tradition even holds that the Law that came down from heaven was communicated in seventy languages so that the seventy nations of the earth listed in Genesis 10 could know, trust, and obey God. Tradition aside, it is clear from Exodus that as God's "kingdom of priests," the Israelites were collectively to perform the function of a priest to the nations by teaching them about God's Law.

It is in this context that the greater Pentecost of Acts comes. Instead of God's Law coming down, which ultimately condemns every person of sin and shows them death, God's Gospel comes down for the salvation of mankind. The Holy Spirit descends and fills the apostles, giving them the (temporary) gift of speaking in different languages.

What they say is not clear from Luke's account in Acts; Luke vaguely mentions that they spoke about "the mighty works of God." However, given what has just occurred in Luke's

Gospel—the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—and what follows in Peter’s sermon in Acts—that Jesus is both God and Messiah, demonstrated by his rising from the dead—it is safe to assume that the apostles preached about Christ, the true Passover Lamb who was recently slain—but raised to life—for the forgiveness of sins and victory over eternal death.

While this language gift was undoubtedly amazing to the apostles, it is not clear that they knew what they were saying. And, it does not matter. The intended beneficiaries of this new gift of language were all of the other Jewish people who had come to Jerusalem from far off places to celebrate Pentecost. Luke gives a geographical list of the Diaspora Jews, the places where they had been dispersed over time. Looking at these places on a map today shows that this Pentecost audience came from southern Europe, the whole Middle East, and all the way to the edge of India. The size of the audience, scholars conjecture, could have been up to 200,000 people.

This is a significant missionary moment. Thousands of people from up to over a thousand miles away are all together in Jerusalem. It is at this moment that the Holy Spirit speaks through the apostles to communicate the saving Gospel to those who—because of the consequences of Babel—could not communicate with each other. While God does not “reverse the curse,” so to speak, of the Tower of Babel, God overcomes it to demonstrate His grace and power in the face of human sin and inability.

In a marvelously miraculous and merciful way God used His Old Testament feast that celebrated God’s just Law as the vehicle to bring sinners together to hear God’s saving Gospel. With the new Passover of Christ’s body and blood shed for the forgiveness of all sin comes the new Pentecost that preaches forgiveness and life for all in Christ. As Peter says to his curious Pentecost crowd at the end of today’s text, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In the verses that follow, Peter explains the that Lord is Jesus the Christ, and calling

on Jesus' name means repenting of one's sin of doubt about Christ, being baptized unto forgiveness, receiving the Holy Spirit, and being delivered from death to life in the name of Christ. This salvation is open to all—Jew and Gentile, male and female, friends and enemies, young and old, you and your neighbor. On that first new Pentecost, three thousand Jews heard God's Gospel, were baptized, and saved.

So where do we fit into this new Pentecost, which we celebrate today? Two points readily come to mind. First, we are all beneficiaries of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has powerfully moved our ancestors and elders in Christ to speak the Gospel to us in a language that we too can understand. We too have been delivered from sin and the language barrier that would divide us from hearing and believing in God's Gospel. We have heard God's Word proclaimed to us through theologians, pastors, teachers, parents, god-parents, and brothers and sisters in Christ. They have translated God's Word for us into the languages we can comprehend and communicated it to us in ways that we can understand.

For this Pentecost gift, we should be eternally thankful. God did not cast us out of Eden and only communicate His salvation in a secret language to a select few, leaving the rest of us deaf to the Word of Life. No, God the Holy Spirit has graciously and powerfully given the gifts of language and communication to many Christians after the apostles, a host of saints who have shared with us the saving acts of Christ. Praise be to God for saving us by speaking faith in Christ into our souls through these gifted and faithful servants!

Second, we might ask ourselves, having also received the Holy Spirit in baptism, how God may be calling us to speak God's Word to those around us. The Apostle Paul in Romans 10 asks, "How are [the unsaved] to believe in him of whom they have never heard...[since] faith comes by hearing?" The answer, of course, is "They cannot," which is why Paul goes on to quote

Isaiah in acclaiming, “How beautiful are the feet of those who [come] to preach the good news [to the unsaved]!”

As we think about the gift of salvation that beautiful feet and mouths have proclaimed to us, we are moved to think about people we encounter and how we can respond to God’s gracious gift of salvation by sharing this same salvation with them. Do we have neighbors who are Hispanic, Vietnamese, Arabian, or Nigerian? What if they do not speak English well or at all? How can we learn—with the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit—to speak the precious message of salvation so that they too can hear and be saved?

How can St. Paul’s Lutheran Church be beautiful feet for the salvation of neighbors from foreign countries that God has brought right here to Irvine? What ethnic group do we think that the Holy Spirit is leading us to minister too in addition to our English-speaking neighbors?

Do you individually support missionaries and Bible translators in foreign countries? Do we do this collectively as a church?

Finally, how can you speak God’s Word to those who speak in your native tongue? Certainly the gift of communication is not limited to speaking in other tongues. There is no small difference between speaking about Christ to a two-year old than a fifty-two or ninety-two year old. What gifts of language can we be praying and working for so that we can best communicate God’s Gospel to the neighbors—whatever their language—that God has brought beside us or prompted us to love far away?

May the Holy Spirit gift and guide us according to His good will as we praise Him for having spoken saving faith into us. Amen.