

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "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." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-13

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, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were 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? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

It must have been terrifying: about 120 men and women in robes, crammed into a room built to hold no more than 30 people comfortably.

The festival celebrated the Spring Barley Harvest; Jews had come from their own countries to Jerusalem -- to offer the first fruits from their fields, give thanks to God, and pray that their crops would continue to produce. It was a time of meeting, greeting, and rejoicing in the bounties of the earth and the providence of God.

The disciples must be uncomfortably hot in the small room at this time of year. The high temperature in Jerusalem today is forecast to be 99 degrees. Surely they are feeling faint, longing for some fresh air and a cool drink of water, but they have been told to wait there for God's promise, that they would be 'baptized by the Holy Spirit.' Surely they pray silently and aloud, together, for they are a close-knit group of the faithful, but they are confused and losing hope. How long must they wait? Have they expected too much from their Messiah – or worse, has it been an empty promise all along?

It is now 50 days past Easter. During the first 40 days following the resurrection, they had heard the stories of Jesus' return to many groups of witnesses, to show them that he had indeed risen from the dead. They had been told of Jesus' dramatic ascension into heaven and that the Lord reigns over all the earth, and that light is now dawning for the righteous. So why are they obediently waiting, yet still anxious and afraid?

The reason is that despite the promise of salvation, they are still the oppressed people of the Roman government and the religious authorities. Nothing has changed since Jesus left! Where is their salvation? Should they distrust the very life and teachings of Jesus?

And then... "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, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Today we also hope to be inspired by the breath of God that dwells within us. We have just begun the process of searching for a new pastor for First Presbyterian, and we hope and pray for God's inspiration and guidance throughout our time of discernment. We come here each week to wait upon the promises of God and the continuance of spiritual renewal in our church.

It is difficult to reflect on changes that are taking place as we are living in them, but we can reflect on the churches of our childhoods and compare the changes easily.

Steve and I were born and raised in Carlsbad, and even though NM is a border state, there were no Hispanics in our congregation. We were friends at school, sang in the chorus, played sports, and participated in many activities together, but we attended different churches.

When we moved to Las Cruces in 1970, this church was the same. We never questioned it.

Then, as we neared the year 2000, the cultural make-up of our children's S&L program began to change.

I remember the day I first noticed it; I was helping in the Sanctuary with the children as they practiced processing with the flags of the nations for World Communion Sunday; and as I looked on each precious face, I saw Pablo, and Ji Sun; Destiny, and my own grandchildren, and thought: THIS is the family of God! It has been my favorite Sunday ever since, for it proclaims God's promise to continually create something new. We can now see the faces of the world in this sanctuary, with languages and cultures intertwined.

Genesis is God's Book of Creation and Blessing. The stories of Genesis tell us that God intends for all of us, of different languages and cultures, to live together so that we may come to understand one another:

In Genesis, God's Spirit creates the earth out of nothing by breathing over the dark waters. God is all about creating!

In the story of Noah and the Flood, God sends Noah's sons into different parts of the world, to go forth and be fruitful . . .

At the Tower of Babel, God makes it clear that we are to live to the glory of God and not to our own ambition; for in seeking our own glory, we forget about building the kingdom of God. God disperses his people to far places so that their seeds may scatter throughout a world not yet known.

In the New Testament, at Pentecost, the power of our loving God is again bestowed on the people, and the once-timid disciples find their voices to proclaim Christ. God's creative power is shown in its fullest intensity to assure the people that it is no mistake. It is not sleight-of-hand magic. Pentecost is a gift and miracle of creation.

On all these occasions God creates, and reveals, his unwavering purpose.

God has given the signs, and from that time forward, God encourages us to live out these intentions by remembering the signs. God's signs for this church were shaped in 1854 by the Gadsden Purchase, in which the United

States bought land from Mexico, on which we now live. The first

First Presbyterian Church was built as a mission church for the immigrants who had come to this new territory from the Mexican border.

Then, in the 1950s, this church became sponsors to a Dutch immigrant family with seven children. At the funeral of Margaret Hardin about ten years ago, I spoke with one of those children, now a grandmother, who had come to the graveside to remember her childhood and Margaret's influence on it. That person is Wanda Mattiace, who shared that Margaret had supported the family in many ways, especially by taking stacks of National Geographic magazines to them so they could learn to read English, look at the wonderful photos, and marvel at a wider world. Many members of this church embraced the family in significant ways.

I remember the day in about 2010 that Ebenezer Tumban of Cameroon appeared in his impressive native dress to worship with us. He was a PhD student, a third-generation Presbyterian and son of a pastor -- the first African of many. Ebenezer seemed to appear out of nowhere! He was well over 6 feet tall and carried himself regally as he walked in a stately manner down the middle aisle. All heads turned to gaze at him. Then came his sister, Annenbom, Jean-Bernard and Michelle, Olivier and Prisca, Emmanuel and Mirielle, Irene and Simplicie, Lyly, Richard, and Samuel, and the list continues to grow.

A Cameroonian family visited their homeland and brought back a gift to the church -- the artwork we now have displayed on the southwest wall.

During the presentation to the congregation, the African students expressed their gratitude for finding a church family that welcomed them and made them a part of our lives. They led worship services with their lively call-and-response music, swaying in the aisles with rhythm instruments, and their songs included American hymns taught to them by missionaries in Africa.

Also came *Iglesia del Pueblo*, the Korean Church, families from all over the world, with whom we enjoy our common faith as brothers and sisters in Christ. We know this is not our own doing! How can it be?

As at Pentecost, voices in our church are praising God in many languages; traditions are loosening, breaking open, and flourishing as we share them. **Can it be** the same breath of God, the wind of creation that swept across the waters, the tongues of fire, bringing something to life out of the energy of chaos and disturbance? **Can it be** a mighty wind that challenges us to heed the call of our creative, loving, and renewing God, to discover how small our world is, after all? **Can it be** our call to encourage beautiful and creative diversity among all the people, divine understanding of each other, and peace among nations?

And I wonder:

How will God continue to breathe and work in us to proclaim God's glory?

How will the Holy Spirit create understanding among us with our different cultures and languages?

And most importantly,

How will we be touched by the tongues of fire, and respond?

It is our privilege and honor -- our calling, to be a part of this phenomenon in the church today, to see beyond the everyday struggles to communicate and be assured that God is inspiring us to proclaim and be witnesses to the love of God, together.

The disciples in the room on the day of Pentecost had gathered to pray and wait -- they were not aware of the plans God had in store for them -- and what a surprise it was! It was a phenomenon of vast proportions that set in motion a worldwide church movement in which we are still participating today.

We are the descendants of that day in Jerusalem, when there was little hope and much speculation about the future; and then the breath of God came into the room with infused, creative power unfurled and transformed their doubts into hope. And all the men and women in that room spilled out into the streets and shared their incredible, life-changing experience with everyone they met. It was an event of contagious energy as the Spirit created a new life of mission within them.

Today we respond to God's creative gifts to this church -- to this room of expectant disciples whom God has claimed to BE his church. We have become full participants in the miracles of God!

Yet, when we are living among the miracles in everyday circumstances, we often miss the importance or

magnitude of the happenings around us. We might say, “This is an ordinary town – what good thing ever comes out of Las Cruces?” Indeed, Nathanael asks the same question in Galilee regarding Jesus, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Philip answers, “Come and See.”

When our granddaughter Sarah was less than two years old, she would not accept Grandpa’s invitation to go with her older brother and sister in the truck for a ride to do something special, such as a trip to the book store or lunch, or ice cream. Sarah was content to stay home with her mommy, where she felt secure.

But finally, the day came. Steve invited Jack and Elizabeth to go with him; and little Sarah, standing there, suddenly feeling left out, said, “Papa, what about me?!”

These words, “What about Me?” from a toddler are expected; but God does not envision the Church to be a place that asks, “What about Me?”

The disciples in Jerusalem were wondering, “What will happen to ME?” Little did they know that they were about to be touched by God’s refining fire, transformed, and sent out into the world to be missionaries.

And they would learn to ask, not “What about ME?” but

“What about WE?” and “What about THEM?”

WE ARE THE CHURCH. Without its people and our mission, the Church would not exist.

The Spirit of God is moving among us today, at Pentecost – building our mission, one that we are beginning to see more clearly.

Hang on to your hats and clutch your skirts!

The Mighty Wind of Creation is stirring in this Sanctuary!

Let the Spirit soar within you, and come along for the ride!

AMEN