

Getting It Right This Time

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Pentecost, May 15, 2005

Genesis 11:1-9 NIV

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel — because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Acts 2:1-21 NIV

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

John 20:19-23 NIV

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Did you ever go somewhere you're sure you've never been, and have the eerie feeling you'd been there before? Or perhaps you found yourself in a conversation and it suddenly seemed you had had the conversation already. The French have an expression for this, *déjà vu* or "already seen." It's happened to me a time or two, like driving into a strange town and having a familiar feeling, as though somewhere in the distant past I had driven there before but I just couldn't remember when.

The Bible has some *déjà vu* experiences also, or something similar to them. For in the Bible we find that some events seem to come around in another form, at another time and place. Theologians call this *typology*, the correspondence of a later event in the Bible to an earlier one. The earlier event is prophetic — the *type*. The later one is the fulfillment — the *antitype*. The earlier event is a kind of model for the later one. So the later event has a sort of *déjà vu* quality to it.

Let's look at a few examples. The Bible's first event, of course, is the creation, when God made all things. How could the creation ever be repeated? But creation comes around again, for as Paul says, *ei tis en christo, kaine ktisis* — "If any one is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God saves us through a *déjà vu* experience; we go through creation all over again. He puts us into a "new heavens and new earth," a biblical phrase that signifies the renewal of his covenant with his people.

The exodus from Egypt is another biblical type. The exodus was the event through which the Lord delivered his people from slavery to an evil power, and set them free to serve and worship him. It corresponds to another liberating event, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead — an event that has the same meaning and purpose, the rescue of God's people from bondage to sin and death. Early Christian theologians and hymn writers understood this correspondence well. In the eighth century, John of Damascus wrote this Easter hymn that uses the imagery of the exodus to describe the resurrection:

*Come, ye faithful, raise the strain
Of triumphant gladness;
God hath brought his Israel
Into joy from sadness;
Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke
Jacob's sons and daughters;
Led them with unmoistened foot
Through the Red Sea waters.

'Tis the spring of souls today;
Christ hath burst his prison,
And from three days' sleep in death
As a sun hath risen;
All the winter of our sins,
Long and dark, is flying
From his light, to whom we give
Laud and praise undying.*

The apostle Peter tells of another correspondence in his First Letter. "God's patience waited in the days of Noah," he says, "during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:20-21). As Peter explains it, the flood of Noah prefigures the waters of Christian baptism — waters through which people are saved and brought into renewed life in the Lord.

Sometimes the correspondence is a contrast. The old event was where something went wrong, but the new corresponding event makes things right. Think, for example, of Adam, the first man. Adam yielded to the tempter, disobeyed God, and lost out on paradise. Adam had been created in the image of God, but that image was dimmed and disfigured through sin, and mankind became subject to death. But, says the apostle Paul, what Adam lost has been restored in Christ, a second Adam. "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. . . . Just

as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:21-11, 47, 49). The sin of Adam has been undone through Christ, the new Adam.

Today, in the story of the Day of Pentecost, we meet another of these contrasting correspondences. What happened at Pentecost reverses the damage that was done in an event very familiar to us from Bible history — the story of the tower of Babel. The Book of Genesis tells us, “the whole world had one language and a common speech.” Many people today think that would be a *good* thing. Wouldn’t it be great if all the world’s peoples could just merge into one wonderful culture — a kind of *multi-culture* — and everybody would be able to communicate with everyone else? You often hear this hope expressed in the phrase, “Can’t we all just get along?” That’s the kind of culture the world had in those days, when people fanned out across the earth looking for a place to live and settled in the plain of Shinar, which is Babylon or modern-day Iraq. Now, if only that same “let’s-all-be-one-big-happy-family” feeling could just be restored in Iraq today, might we not have an end to terrorism and bloodshed? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?

But, strangely enough, God didn’t see it that way! From his perspective there was a big problem with this unified world culture and one language. The problem was that people had forgotten about *him*. They got into this big building project as a way to get power and fame for themselves — never mind the Creator God. “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that *we may make a name for ourselves* and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). *If we can reach to the heavens on our own, we won’t need God! Our technology will render him unnecessary. Who needs God when we can reach for the stars on our own?*

The Bible doesn’t make any apology for the fact that God is a *jealous God*. He doesn’t tolerate any rival claimants to his position of supremacy over the affairs of the human race. And that isn’t because he’s just petty and self-serving. There’s a very good reason why people need to put God first, and defer to his authority. If we don’t take him into account, then *we put ourselves in his place*. We make ourselves out to be gods.

When the people of the plain of Shinar erected their tower, they were just yielding to another version of the serpent’s temptation in the Garden of Eden: “You will be like gods.” And when people become their own gods *that’s not good for other people*. The history of the human race attests to the fact that when some people elevate themselves with godlike superiority over others, repression and pain and suffering are the result. We have only to look at the likes of Joe Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein to be reminded of this sad truth. Ultimately, we treat other people with kindness and respect only when we understand that we’re not the center of the universe. There’s Another who’s greater than we are. He’s the one who’s really in charge, and none of us can compete with him for position and power.

So “the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building” in the plain of Shinar, the Bible tells us. And “the Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language *so they will not understand each other*.” By depriving people of a common language, God frustrated their great project. He kept them from “reaching to the heavens” and making a name for themselves to the exclusion of others.

The most effective extension of our abilities is through our speech. God created the universe through the power of his spoken word: “Let there be light.” In the same way — since we’re made in his image — our words have the ability to create what never existed before. By our spoken or written word we establish and maintain relationships, exchange information, and in general build the world we live in. Speech is part of what makes us human. Think of what you can do that your dog or cat can’t do. But this wonderful world of words comes with a price, for our speech can be turned to bad purposes as well as good. For one thing, we can use words to *lie*, to express an untruth. Your dog can’t lie to you, because he can’t speak. The people of the plain of Shinar were using their speech to establish a lie about themselves: that they could reach to the heavens, place themselves on God’s level, and control their own destiny. God confused their language, and confounded their lie.

Fast-forward four or five thousand years — nobody knows how long it was — to Jerusalem in what we now call the year 29, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Some people are gathered “all together in one place,” Luke tells us, just as the people of the plain of Shinar had all come together in one place to build

their city. The people we're talking about, of course, are the apostles of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. And along with them are thousands of worshipers from all parts of the Mediterranean world — as the Book of Acts calls them, “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.” They're coming for a Jewish festival, but they live in many countries and all speak different local languages. They wouldn't normally understand one another, nor would they understand the speech of those Galilean followers of Jesus who've come together on Pentecost, this fiftieth day after his resurrection.

Until now, these Galileans have said nothing — nothing in public — about Jesus and his resurrection. The risen Lord has appeared to them, but only in private. After the humiliation of their leader's crucifixion and death, the apostles have pretty much kept to themselves. But here, on Pentecost, something amazing occurs! The sound of a rushing wind fills the place where the apostles are gathered, and what looks like flames of fire begin to appear over each of them. *Look, they're going to speak! They're going to say something. What will they say?* Will they use their powers of speech to justify themselves, and make *themselves* look good after the death of their leader? Will it be, “Come, let's build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves . . .”? Will it be the tower of Babel, *déjà vu*, with a confusion of the message? Or will they get it right this time?

Luke tells us what the bystanders heard. “We hear them declaring *the wonders of God* in our own tongues!” they said. Instead of trying to “make a name for themselves,” the apostles *gave praise to God for his awesome deeds and mighty works*. And people from all over the world, speaking different languages, heard the same message of God's greatness. At Babel, God confused the world's language because people used their speech to glorify themselves instead of him. At Pentecost, God took the world's confused languages and brought them back together to give him the glory and honor that belong to him alone.

Our speech is a powerful weapon. James, in his letter, describes the power of the tongue:

The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness (James 3:5-9).

What a temptation it is to use our words to build ourselves up at the expense of others — to thrust our own little towers into the heavens, putting ourselves in God's place and trying to “make a name for ourselves.” But through the gift of the Holy Spirit we have a chance to *get it right this time*. Like the apostles at Pentecost, we can yield our tongues to God, using our speech to give honor to him, to bless other people, and to build positive values into our lives.

So it doesn't have to be “*déjà vu* all over again.” If we have a “speech problem,” we can make it right. We can change from unhealthy, self-serving or negative speech to wholesome and generous speech that blesses the Lord. I've known some folks who could never say anything positive. Whatever we were talking about, they always seemed to find something wrong with it. “Beautiful day, isn't it?” “Well, you never can tell when it's going to cloud over.” What about our country? “Looks like we're going to hell in a hand basket.” Or church finances? “People just don't give to the church like they used to.” Negative speech like this is hardly a way to bless and extol the mighty works of God. But when the Holy Spirit comes, he fills our lips with praise instead of complaining.

Perhaps you have a habit of talking a lot about yourself, but not listening to others. I've known some people like that. When you converse with them, it's amazing how much you learn about them and how little they learn about you! Some folks seem to feel the purpose of their speech is to “make a name for themselves.” I was this way myself, before I knew the Lord, but when the Holy Spirit touches your life he changes the way you speak. I found that *listening is part of conversing*. And when we do speak, we speak to express care and concern for others, and ask about *their* needs.

Maybe you have a speech habit of putting yourself down. “I'm dumb, I'm unattractive, I'm incompetent — I can't do this, I can't do that. I'm not a very good Christian, and I'm just a nobody around here.” I catch myself at this game all the time. It's not really godly humility, it's a way of “making a name for yourself”

in reverse. And it's a way to avoid responsibility by lowering the expectations others have for you. This kind of speech doesn't honor the God who made you, nor the Christ who saved you, nor the Holy Spirit who fills you!

But Pentecost is here. Jesus Christ has breathed his life into his church. His Holy Spirit has come in power upon us, and we don't have to live in Babel *déjà vu*. Like the apostles, who yielded their tongues to the Spirit of God, we can speak the resurrection power and healing and love of Christ into our lives and the lives of others. Because of Pentecost, we can get it right this time.

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