

Acts: 2: 1-17 All Together Now

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place,” writes the author of the Book of Acts. Growing up, many of us were taught that Pentecost was the birthday of the Christian Church, and so goes the logic that the first, original Day of Pentecost must have been when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and those who had gathered there, 50 days after Easter.

But just as the Last Supper was the Jewish Passover seder Jesus celebrated with the disciples, Pentecost was, and still is today, the Jewish festival of Shavuot in Hebrew. 50 days after Passover, Shavuot remembers the receiving of God’s Law, the Torah, which is the Gift of God for the People of God, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Pentecost as the birthday of the Church did not happen out of the blue. The people were all together in one place, to mark the receiving of God’s Gift of Torah on Pentecost, when God’s Gift of the Holy Spirit came upon them, just as Jesus had promised. The birth of the Church is part of this unfolding Saga, the great love story of God and God’s creation, that God is still writing. As we hear the Word on this Day of Pentecost, we are part of the past, the present, and God’s future all in one. So also, the reading from the Hebrew Scripture this morning is another story that helps us explore the meaning of Pentecost for us as the Church.

This story from Genesis is well known as the story of the Tower of Babel, and the popular interpretation of it goes something like this: it’s a story about human arrogance in attempting to build a tower reaching to the sky, as if to claim equality with God, and God foils this human scheme by mixing up their language and scattering them all over the face of the earth. It’s been told as a story of vain human pride and God’s punishment of human arrogance. Sounds clear enough, right? But a closer reading of the text shows us something different.

The story is part of the “prehistory” of the Bible, after the story of the Noah’s Arc. All people on the earth shared one language. As they migrated, they came to a valley and settled in that place. With everyone speaking the same language, using the same words, living within the boundary of the place, things were going smoothly for them. And so they wished to preserve this sameness and

the safety of staying in one place, and to establish their identity there by making a name for themselves. God calls them mortals, which literally means “the children of Adam, the human beings formed from the dust of the earth.” So, to “make a name for themselves,” the mortals made from the dust, take the dust, burn bricks and start to build a city and a tower, because otherwise, they would be scattered abroad over the face of the earth, and they did not want that. They didn’t want to chase any dreams or see any visions. They wanted to stay right where they were, as one people.

Rather than arrogance and pride, the sentiment I sense here is “fear” and guardedness. The fear of losing that sameness, and hence the urge to keep everyone living in the same place, speaking the same language, having the same lifestyle, and yeah, looking pretty much the same way. They thought, if they could build a city with a tall tower, they would be securely anchored in one place as one people, and make name for themselves, be somebody, and not be dispersed all over the world, filling the earth, God forbid.

And God saw what they were up to. But this is God, you know, the Creator of Universe, who, in the beginning, took pains to create every kind of creatures, the fish and the birds and wild animals of every kind, and filled all the earth, and put the mortals, the human beings in charge of caring for the whole earth and all that lived on it. But rather than punishing the mortals by leaving them to their own devices, God takes action, which is always loving, life-giving, and for the good of the world. God mixed up the language of the mono-lingual mortals so they could not understand one another anymore, creating multi-lingual humanity, and dispersed them on the face of the whole earth, creating a multicultural world, all done with God’s signature touch of variety and diversity.

In this story, it’s all about the language, but language is a metaphor for how we experience and express ourselves. When I left Japan to come to the US as a student, my Japanese friends asked me, “Takako, do you’re gonna think in Japanese or in English?” I answered I didn’t know. Not knowing English, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to experience life in English. Years later, when I became fluent in English and had studied a few other languages, people

would often ask me which language was the most difficult one. One could say which language has the more tenses, or more complicated grammar, but all languages are capable of reflecting the human experience, and with all languages, there is an expression something along the line of “words are not enough.”

Fast-forward to that Day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, when all were together in one place. Those followers of Jesus were all Galileans, from Galilee, we are told. They spoke the Galilean dialect of the Aramaic language. Yet, when the Holy Spirit came upon them with the sound of the fierce wind, they were empowered to speak the languages that were not their own. Drawn by the sound of the rushing wind, people living in Jerusalem came to see what was happening, forming a crowd. They were immigrants, who had emigrated from areas of the Roman Empire to the north, east, south and west of Jerusalem. As subjects of Rome, they knew Greek, the language of the Empire, but they also spoke the languages of their native regions. And it was their native language each of them heard, as those Galilean followers of Jesus spoke of God’s mighty deeds.

God who mixed up the language of the fearful people in the beginning is the God who now empowers them to speak the languages of the world, to tell the gospel in every tongue. On the day of Pentecost, the Church was born with a divine sanction to multilingualism, preserving the variegated beauty of the people of God everywhere.

On this Day of Pentecost, WE are all together in this place. Like those gathered on that Day of Pentecost, we are a community of diverse people. Some of us belong to the families who lived in this valley for generations, some are transplants from other parts of the country, some happily retired to this place, and some of you are with us via Zoom, and your pastor is an immigrant from the other side of the world.

We have different languages of culture and tradition, and some things that mark us as individuals have potential to divide us; many of us are “formal members of this church” while some of us are “faithful friends of the church,” some of us are proud political conservatives and some of us are proud political liberals, some of us say “Green” and some of us say “Red” (I say “Christmas.” If

you are an out-of-state visitor and don't know what I'm talking about, it's a question about the choice of chili sauce to go with your New Mexican meal and one you must be prepared to answer on the spot, as I learned.) We, too, are a variegated band of the followers of Jesus.

Are we open to receive the gift of the Spirit that enables us to understand one another despite our differences that make us unique? Or, will we build a city with a tower that would keep us all the same? We are not to fear these differences among us, but we are to trust in the the Holy Spirit who moves among us and empowers us to listen deeply to one another and speak to one another in the language that may be understood, the language of love. And we will be there for one another and for the world, when life throws us into situations when we find ourselves at loss for words and there is only a sigh too deep for words.

The Holy Spirit who gave birth to the Church on the Day of Pentecost long ago renews us today as the body of Christ, so that we, too, may bear witness to the mighty works of God in this valley, in this nation, and in this world. When the skeptics dismissed the Spirit-filled band of Jesus followers as merely drunk with new wine, Peter spoke in their defense. No, they are not drunk; rather, you are witnessing what the Prophet Joel had said: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions, your elders will dream dreams."

Growing up in a small church in the heart of downtown Tokyo, listening to the Word of God proclaimed in Japanese, reading the Scripture in Japanese and saying the Creed in Japanese, I never imagined I would be preaching in English on the other side of the globe; not in my wildest dreams. All together now, what dreams shall we dream? What visions will we see? What prophetic words are we to speak in this fearful and broken world? Our answers to these questions will shape our mission as the church. This Day of Pentecost is another beginning. It is the wind of the Holy Spirit that is beneath our wings. All Together Now, let us live into God's unfolding future. Amen.