

## The Mighty Acts of God

Read: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-8

In the two year period leading up to my 500 mile walk across northern Spain as a pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago, I set out to learn as much Spanish as I could. I checked Spanish language lesson CDs out of the library and listened to them on the way to and from work. I picked up a little, such as the very important phrase: *donde esta el banjo*: where is the bathroom. I learned *lo siento*: I'm sorry; *perdon*: excuse me; *por favor*: please; *gracias*: thank you; *muy bien and muy bueno*: very good, excellent; *no entiendo*: I don't understand; and so on: a little here, a little there: enough to get by with a little help from my friends and lots of patience from the lovely Spanish people along the Way.

Back here at home, I am so glad we share, not only this building, but our love for Jesus and that we can get together once in awhile in worship and praise of our Savior. And I am humbled that most of you are truly bi-lingual while I remain about one and one sixteenth lingual, with my smattering of Spanish and pinches of German and French thrown in the mix just to make me feel a little better about myself. And of course, I have some Greek and Hebrew too, just to prove I went to seminary.

There are two very famous stories in the Bible involving language, one in Genesis and one in Acts. The first is the wonderful little story about the Tower of Babel and the second is Luke's account of what happened on the first Christian Pentecost.

When I came across a marvelous little article by Jewish rabbi Shai Held entitled, "Tower of uniformity" it got me to thinking. To put it in a nutshell, he says that at issue in Babel was not the fact that they wanted to build a tall tower. Lots of people have built tall structures, like we have done in Manhattan or even Philadelphia. And it's not that God felt God's authority was being threatened. What is at issue is that God's plan to bless the people was that they scatter and fill the whole earth. The creation, all of it, was made for people to fill it "to the praise of His glory," as Paul put it over and over in his letter to the Ephesians.

What the people were afraid to do was trust God so they banded together. Instead of moving out, they moved in. They had the same language and the same words, and therefore they had the same thoughts. They lived on the very verge of totalitarianism, living in one place and building a tall structure to keep them focused on staying together. God said, "Spread out," and they said, "No, but we must stick together."

The article points out that Genesis 10 lists a long genealogy with enough names to wear out even a patient reader, then immediately after the tower story there follows another long list of names which are said to be the descendents of Shem. In Hebrew, Shem means name.

Names in the Bible are important. The lists of names are not put there by God to make a modern reader become tongue tied and then lose interest. There is almost always an important theological point imbedded within biblical genealogies. In the story of Babel there was not a single name recorded but it lies bracketed in between two long lists of people's names. What's the point? In a culture of uniformity, individuals do not count; only the collective is important. But God values each and every person as an individual. Maybe that's one of the points.

A more important point involves trust and obedience to God. The people who fear being scattered over the face of the earth, God finally scatters. God insisted on having it God's way. It felt like judgment. It felt like nothing but divine displeasure. It felt like their worst fears were come upon them at the hands of an angry God. Maybe they interpreted it all wrong.

"God's punishment," according to rabbi Held, "may not ultimately be a punishment at all, but a reaffirmation of the initial divine blessing in the face of human refusal and obstruction...(it is) "an enforced return to the path of blessing." I think the rabbi got it right. And if so, we can be brave in our obedience if we know that God is with us and for us. God is to be both trusted and obeyed. We are set free to be fruitful and multiply, to spread out and become the creative beings God always intended for us to become.

Have you ever wondered about this? Have you ever wondered just how much freedom you have in God? Have you ever been afraid to be creative with your life, choosing instead to play it safe within the confines of conformity, doing only what other people expect and only what the crowd will approve? Have you ever thought that God has trouble noticing you and what concerns you and troubles you and challenges you on a planet populated by billions of people? Have you ever wondered whether or not the one who cast trillions of stars across endless space has an eye on you nevertheless? Have you ever pondered the question, “Does my life matter? Am I here to make some kind of difference, or should I just join the parade of people who have no faith and say to themselves, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?’ ”.

At Babel, God showed great mercy by breaking up the human enterprise that reduced people to worker bees, to numbers without names, to all the schemes that dehumanize people and empty us all of our glorious humanity and make us like clones reflecting each other instead of looking and living like people made in God’s image to fulfill God’s intentions in creation. Every one of you is unique and every one of you matters to God.

Fast-forward thousands of years to the first Christian Pentecost. Fifty days prior to that day, Jesus rose from the dead. He appeared to thousands of people during forty days after the first Easter; then he was taken from their sight. All those who met him became deeply convinced that Jesus was alive, and they were right. Jesus instructed his disciples to return to Jerusalem and wait until they were endued with power from on high. The Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh just as the prophet Joel had proclaimed.

The apostle James advised, “Let not many of you become teachers for we all make many mistakes.” For years I have been linking the Babel story with the Pentecost story but I think I’ve been at least partially making a mistake. I’ve preached and taught that Pentecost was the reversal of the confusion of language that took place beside the ancient tower, but that’s not exactly right.

To be sure, the event was replete with ecstatic phenomena: the sound like a mighty, rushing wind; the vision of fiery tongues hovering over peoples’ heads;

and the proclamation of the mighty acts of God through ecstatic speech, commonly known as *glossalalia* or speaking in tongues. Whether they were using known languages unknown to them as common Galileans, or whether they were speaking with heavenly utterance unknown to human beings is up for debate. But accompanying this miracle of speech was a miracle of hearing, and that's what is often missed.

The text says that each heard what was said in their own native language. It wasn't that all language became one once again like it was at Babel where the people had the same language and the same words. The Spirit filled preaching broke down cultural and ethnic barriers so that all heard the Gospel in a way they understood it perfectly. Their cultural identity was preserved, not erased. Their natural question was, "How is this possible?" The short answer is, "With God, all things are possible."

Just like the first Christian preachers on Pentecost, you and I live in a multi-lingual world. And we who would share the Gospel must never forget that we are surrounded by people who don't speak the language of faith. We can no longer assume that the people we meet know Christian language. When we gather, we speak our own language, filled with Christian jargon and terminology. We don't even think about it. Those around us are now largely ignorant of our most cherished stories from the Bible. Many of them don't even own a Bible, let alone read it. People don't know the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed. Large numbers of our friends and neighbors live as though there is no God or as though God is irrelevant to their daily lives. I don't like it any better than you do but it's the truth.

On Pentecost, God inspired preachers to speak in the language of all the different people gathered in Jerusalem on that day. As usual, God takes the initiative in reaching out to people where they are. God doesn't obliterate their uniqueness. God comes to them in words and deeds that they can understand. The preachers on the first Pentecost proclaimed the mighty acts of God. And God expects us to do it the same way. It is rarely easy.

I have a good friend whose son worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He went with his wife to a very rural village in Ethiopia. The people there didn't even have a written language. After several years, he and others finally developed writing in their language and succeeded in producing the Christmas story in writing for the first time ever. Soon after, he was driving the ministry jeep when a young man on a motorcycle slammed into them and was injured. My friend's son Nathan, though declared innocent by the police and all witnesses, was thrown into an Ethiopian prison until a man from the States came up with \$6,000 to purchase his freedom. At his trial, the judge said, "In our country, we are not so concerned with who is guilty or innocent. We are concerned that those who have provide for those who do not have." Their notion of justice is radically different than ours.

Nathan suffered from PTSD as a result of that awful experience in a dank, Ethiopian prison. He now lives with his wife back in her home country of Norway. They are no longer in ministry with Wycliffe. But the story isn't over. They adopted two Ethiopian orphans and are raising them to know the Lord. Nathan now works in Norway helping Syrian refugees to re-settle. And who knows what the children will accomplish in this world. Every one of us is part of an unfinished story.

Very often the mighty acts of God look like anything but on the surface. We can all see God's might in the events of the Exodus, in Moses speaking God's truth to Pharaoh's power, in seas parting, in enemies being defeated, in miracles, signs, and wonders. But so often God's might shows up in least expected ways and places. God becomes a human, born in a stable among lowly people. Jesus overcomes the prince of hell in the wilderness at the end of a forty day fast. Jesus bursting forth from death on the first Easter is a dazzling and unexpected display of the mighty acts of God. The Holy Spirit being poured out lavishly and indiscriminately on "all flesh" as Luke records it in Acts 2 shows us much about God's methods.

So often our most powerful testimony comes forth out of the lowly places, the lonely places, and the broken places of our lives. God works in surprising

ways. God is creative and unpredictable. Just when we have our religious language and our words all organized, God breaks through with new energy and creativity.

To faithfully proclaim the mighty acts of God across cultural borders takes both trust and obedience. And it takes the quiet confidence that this work is first God's work as God is reaching out to every single person we meet in some way or another. The amazing thing about it is that we get to play a part in God's plan of salvation. We are commanded to go into the entire world and preach the Gospel and teach people to obey all that Christ commands. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Let us add our voices in proclaiming the mighty acts of God wherever and whenever we experience them.