

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹²Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

¹⁴Then 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. ¹⁵These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷"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.

¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood before the coming of the
great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Everyone in Babylon was trying to call on the Lord—they were building a tower to reach up to God in heaven. And as the tower grows in height, the people shout to God, "Can you hear me now?" But the problem in the story of Babel is not that God can't hear the people. Rather, it's that the people aren't listening to God. They are so busy chatting, plotting and planning, so busy trying to get to God, or perhaps more accurately, trying to be like God or even BE God, that they don't listen to God. Instead, they build that silly tower—and they build and they build and they build, higher, higher, higher towards the heavens, higher towards God, thinking that the closer they get to the clouds, the closer they'll be to God, indeed, the more like God they will be and all the while they're thinking that they're getting close to God, they're actually distancing themselves from God.

After all, God didn't ask the Israelites to build up—God asked them to build out—to build out from where they were into new countries and new communities—places that were in desperate need, places full of people thirsting for God's justice and aching for God's care. But instead of going out, they went up—away from the very people and places that God had instructed them to go.

And while it's easy to sit back and find fault with the Israelites for not listening to God, we understand their reluctance to build out, don't we? We understand their navel gazing and pursuit of self-improvement. After all, foreign lands and different people can be intimidating at best and terrifying at worst. The folks of Babel had it pretty good—why would they consider leaving friends and family to head out into the great unknown. Why would they go somewhere where they didn't understand the language and they didn't know what was in the food when they could just stay home?

I likely would do the same. And the folks of Babel likely would have as well had it not been for God forcing them to separate and disperse when God caused them all to begin speaking different languages such that they could not understand each other.

And speaking of understanding each other, it isn't an accident that this story about the Tower of Babel is paired with the story of Pentecost. It can be tempting to think of Pentecost as the "coming full circle" ending to the story that began in Babel. In Babel the people all spoke the same language and yet they didn't understand God and in the story of Pentecost, the people all speak different languages and yet they understand each other when they speak about God. Pentecost could easily be the final chapter on the story that began with Babel.

Except that it's not. Pentecost isn't an ending, it's a beginning. It's OUR beginning. It's the beginning of this place that means so much to so many of us—this Suttons Bay Congregational Church. There aren't words to express my gratitude for the opportunity to celebrate this birthday of the church with all of you. Indeed, I need

you—and, if I may be so bold as to say it—we need each other—not just to celebrate, but also and especially to help us to learn the language of the church and to keep the language of the church alive.

Because Lord knows, there are plenty of other languages, plenty of babble, that tries to—like the people of Babel did—separate us from God and keep us from following Jesus. There are plenty of folks out there who would point at us and laugh and think that there **MUST** be something wrong with us—that we must have been drinking down at Eddie’s before the service this morning if we’re actually still trying to speak this language we speak—this language of God, this language of love—this language that was born on Pentecost so many years ago.

This language says “acceptance” in a world bent on denying people their dignity as children of God simply because of the color of their skin, the gender of their partner, or the disability with which they live. This language says “peace” in a world that values violence over dialogue and swords over plowshares. This language says “justice” in a world where corruption, greed, and self-interest lead to the exploitation of women, children, minorities, animals, and the earth. This language says “love” in a world that, well, in a world that really needs love, a whole lot of love.

This is the language of God. And this is where we learn it; within these walls, from these strings, in your voices, from this book, in our prayers, and at this table. The language of God—the language of love. Utterly amazing. Thanks be to God.