Sermon, June 8, 2025
"Babel, Babble,
The Day of Pentecost
Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
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Intro before the liturgy: Is it possible to go overboard on Pentecost? To do too much? Probably, but push the limits where you can. Pull out the stops. Let there be color and light and flame and wind. It could be real; or use images or suggestions – something that points to the world beyond the walls, beyond the horizon we can see. Pentecost is about catching people off guard. It's about surprise. "Suddenly," Luke writes, suddenly there was wind and there was fire. Maybe surprise is too much to go for with a group that has been worshiping for years. But how about wonder or joy? There is something to celebrate on this opening of doors kind of day. There are opportunities being offered when the Spirit shows up.

First reflection on Tower of Babel

I have been in this church business in a variety of roles for 45 years or so and I don't ever recall usng this alternate lesson from the book of Genesis on Pentecost before nor do I recall ever hearing or preaching a sermon on the Tower of Babel. There's a first time for everything. It may seem like an odd choice for Pentecost - in one story languages are confused, while in the other all hear the one story in spite of their linguistic differences.

For those who went to Sunday School or read Bible stories as a child, it's a familiar lesson with a familiar moral: those people had too much arrogance, too much pride, to think they could reach to the heavens. But in Aviva Zornberg's book "The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis", he suggests that it's not that the builders' imaginations are too big, but that they are actually too small.

What the builders of the Tower of Babel fail to imagine, Zornberg writes, is "a multiplicity of selves, of worlds, existing together, even interacting with one another." The Tower of Babel is a tower built on sameness, on conformity, on a denial of difference.

Any Frykholm describes that on the surface, the text seems to present a jealous and spiteful God who is against human achievement, a God who worries that humans will become too powerful and self-assured. I can imagine that the builders felt angry and lost when they watched their creation crumble to the ground: God must hate us. But the text introduces something more of a question: what is it about human purpose and cooperation that can go so wrong?

In Nobel Prize-winning author Olga Tokarczuk's Polish-language novel "Flights", the narrator, who spends most of the novel in airports, marvels at the fact that there are whole countries where people speak only English.

But not like us — we have our own languages hidden in our carry-on luggage, in our cosmetics bags, only ever using English when we travel, and then only in foreign countries, to foreign people. It's hard to imagine, but English is their real language! Oftentimes their only language. They don't have anything to fall back on or to turn to in moments of doubt.

On March 1 of this year our government declared for the first time that English is the "official" language of the United States. It felt like a Tower of Babel moment, given the 350 other languages spoken in this country and the 300 more indigenous languages that were spoken here when Europeans arrived. Perhaps Tokarczuk's narrator would wish them "some little language of their own" so that they could learn the beauty of difference, the need to reach across boundaries for a more expansive imagination.

In the Qur'an there is a sentence often cited by people in interfaith circles. It says, "We made you into peoples and tribes so that you might know one another." This is a paradoxical statement. Isn't it easier to know people who speak your own language and come from your own tribe? This is what the Tower of Babel builders knew to be true: it's easier to build a tower if you all speak the same language.

And yet the knowledge that we acquire from reaching across boundaries is knowledge rooted in humility. It has in its memory all the clumsy mistakes we make as we try to cross that boundary: mistranslations, misunderstandings, even gestures that work one way in one culture and a completely different way in another.

But this is not an actual problem. This is a gift. It's a gift I took a long time to discover until I finally traveled outside of the US at the age of 65 – first to Nicaragua, then on a sabbatical to Spain and even crossing our nearby border into Quebec. Our bewilderment, the diversity of language and perspective, the fact that sometimes we use the same language but different words or the same words that mean different things — all of these are invitations to go deeper, invitations to welcome our own bafflement in the face of the reality of other human beings.

So by the year 30CE, there are a multiplicity of languages and peoples and they all gather in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Let's see what happens.

Second reflection on Acts 2, the Pentecost event

If we contrast what we just heard with the story of the Tower of Babel, everyone keeps speaking their own language, but their understanding of each other is miraculously increased. Those who burst out of the upper room in Jerusalem had to brave languages far beyond their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference, and do so with no guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them — new words, strange words, scary words — were nevertheless essential words — words precisely ordained for the time and place they occupied.

Meanwhile, the crowds who listened had to take risks as well. They had to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for wonder instead of contempt. They had to widen their inner circles, and welcome strangers with accents into their midst. Those who were graced by the flames of fire spoke, and others heard and they joined together and a new gathering, *ecclesia*, "church" began to be formed.

So what do these lessons of people long ago mean for us today? I think we are in the midst of a Babel experience today. We are confused, we don't understand each other and we are scattered over the face of the earth. The only solution is to join hands. The Spirit did not come upon them individually. They were not sitting in their own homes individually watching "Meet the Press" when the Spirit came. They were together. They experienced the wind, the heat, the fire together. The Spirit pushed them out of that room *en masse* and they went into the streets of Jerusalem *en masse*. And maybe Peter was the spokesperson or his sermon got recorded but they were all there – together – and they carved a path from Judaism to Christianity – together – and it was a long tortuous path with many twists and turns, ups and downs. Christianity implies Church which implies people together as messy, complicated and frustrating as that can sometimes be.

There is no way to overstate how much we need to gather as God's people right now. We are a divided people and nation: i
ssues like climate change, racial injustice, economic disparity, the purpose of government continue to not only separate us but set us against one another. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to instruct us, shape us, remake us, and commission us. We need fresh languages of bridge-building. We need new words to rekindle love. We need the wind and fire of God to challenge our complacencies, reset our priorities, ease our anxieties, and move us out. And we need to do it as Church, gathering together in small groups, in congregations, as part of a national Church, as part of a worldwide Church. We need to pray and to move and above all to believe that we aren't orphaned but the Good Spirit is with us all. Come Holy Spirit, come.