

Peter Raised His Voice

Acts 2:1-21

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The story that Carolyn just read, the story of Pentecost, the story of the birth of the church, has often been understood by Christians to be a response to the story of the Tower of Babel found in Genesis.

The Tower of Babel is an ancient Near Eastern origin myth that found its way into our canonical Bible. Origin myths attempt to explain why the world is the way it is; they typically answer a question. In this case, the question is: why do we all speak different languages? It's so brief we can read it right now. Listen to this story with the story of Pentecost in your mind:

Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name

for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:4-9)

So in other words, God sees human beings cooperating and showing off their collective power, and thinks, “I better shut that down right down.” God doesn’t want a rival, and so God disrupts our communication, making us incomprehensible to one another, and immediately we just

fall apart and wander in different directions and lose our sense of shared humanity.

Until Pentecost. Pentecost aspires to be an origin myth. Rather than answering a question about why the world is the way it is, Pentecost offers a vision for how it could be. According to this story, we don't have to be separated by language and culture and nation. With the help of God, with the mysterious force of the Holy Spirit, we can achieve mutual understanding. We can find common purpose.

I'm going to cut to the chase. It is hard to preach on the story of Pentecost in the wake of the White House announcement that the United States will withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement. In my eyes, this move is not only a denial of scientific reality. It is a denial of international relations. Here's how Bill McKibben, professor of environmental studies at Middlebury,

describes the Paris Accord. In a New York Times [op-ed](#), he writes,

The Paris accord was a high achievement of the diplomatic art, a process much messier than science, and inevitably involving compromise and unseemly concession. Still, after decades of work, the world's negotiators managed to bring along virtually every nation: the Saudis and the low-lying Marshall Islanders, the Chinese and the Indians. One hundred and ninety-five nations negotiated the Paris accord, including the United States.

As a Christian, I see a withdrawal from the Paris Agreement to be incompatible with the spirit of Pentecost. As a preacher, I thought, “What on earth am I supposed to say?” I ran into Chris Brunelle in the office last week, and he said, “Pentecost and the Paris Accord news line right up, don't they?” We laughed. And he said, “Don't you wish you had better material?”

And I do wish that. I wish the world was different. I wish that the Pentecost spirit was rushing through the whole world right now, because God knows we need it. Badly. I need some Pentecost in my own heart and mind, because more and more, I look at the people who think very, very differently than I do and I find them incomprehensible. And I know they find me incomprehensible too. And the chasms between us just seem to widen, and Pentecost seems more and more like an impossible dream.

So what do we do? What do we do as individuals, as the church, when the world seems more Babel-esque than ever?

Here's something that I found very helpful. A colleague told me that she always thinks of Pentecost as the moment when Peter finally finds his voice. That really struck me, because when I read the story, I always focus on the group aspect of it. The Holy Spirit descending on

the crowd. Peter is just there to quote the prophet Joel and issue what I think of as one of the funniest lines in the Bible: “They are not drunk, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning!”

But my colleague inspired me to think of Peter’s actions in the context of his whole story. Peter is considered one of the first disciples and the rock of the church, but let’s not forget that he fails in the worst possible way at the worst possible time, denying his relationship with Jesus three times after Jesus is arrested. Three times, Peter fails to speak on behalf of his beloved teacher. Three times, he lacks the clarity and the courage to defend his most core belief.

Fast-forward to Pentecost, to the amazed and perplexed crowd, to the sneers of the detractors. In the midst of this chaos, Peter raises his voice. Can you imagine how loudly he needs to speak, to be heard over the clamor? Peter raises his voice and says, “Listen to what I say.”

Listen to what I say.

Pentecost isn't just about understanding others. It's also about understanding oneself and what one is called to do. Peter acts with such clarity here. Necessary clarity. And it makes me realize, Pentecost wouldn't be Pentecost without Peter and his ability to make meaning out of what is happening. Without Peter, everyone would've stayed perplexed, uncertain what to do with this new magical communication.

But Peter invokes Joel, and God's ancient and radical promise that the Spirit is available for *everyone*: sons and daughters, young and old, even slave and free. *Anyone* can channel God's transformative power. *Anyone* see the world as God sees it. *Anyone* can dream God's dreams. *Anyone* can be a vessel for the Holy Spirit in the world. Peter embodies this promise by standing up and raising his voice.

In this our own time, I think the church is called to remember Peter and to challenge ourselves to *raise our voice*. We're doing it already, and we cannot stop. We cannot give into defeat, even when it's tempting to just throw up our hands and declare the situation hopeless.

Because here's the thing. We—and by we, I mean our church but also our denomination and the many other churches committed to justice for the earth—we have a much-needed voice, a necessary clarity. We have been insisting, for a long time, that faith and environmental science are not at odds, and that human beings are called by God to work together as good stewards of the earth. Our leaders need to hear this. Our children need to hear this. The world needs to hear this.

Pentecost is not about forsaking your deepest beliefs for the sake of understanding. It's not about compromise to the point of monotony. It's not about erasing differences.

Note that the crowd doesn't start speaking one universal language. The people all continue to speak their own languages, but in a way that reaches across boundaries.

And I think that's our challenge, right now, as individuals and as communities: to find the sweet spot between commitment and compromise, between staying true to one's own course while also making space for the reality of difference.

What is that you won't compromise on? What are your deepest commitments, your profoundest truths? How can you raise your voice in service of these values, in a way that crosses boundaries and creates understanding?

This is our part to figure out, as a church. If we can do our part, then we can help create space for God to do God's part. And what is God's part? To make miracles happen. To make the impossible possible. To surprise us with what

we are capable of, when we shed our self-imposed limits
and trade cynicism for hope.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come.

Amen.