

English Worship Service (May 2021, Pentecost)

Introduction

Hello everyone, and welcome to our first English-speaking worship service for the Protestant Church in Saint-Etienne. As you may already know, today is Pentecost, where we celebrate the birth of Christ's church. And so, we gather here in the hope of starting something new today as well. Now I know that many of you watching at home speak some English, but are perhaps not fluent. So, I will do my best to speak slowly and clearly, but if you have any questions about anything that I say, please don't hesitate to ask! Our next English-speaking service in our sanctuary will be June 20 at 2:30 in the afternoon. Thank you for being with us here today.

Let us begin our worship service with a brief moment of prayer...

[Let us pray...]

Almighty God, at the feast of Pentecost you sent your Holy Spirit to the disciples, filling them with joy and boldness to preach the gospel; empower us with that same Spirit to witness to your redeeming love and draw all people to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Second Scripture Reading: Genesis 11:1-9

1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then 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.' ⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And 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.' ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore 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.

Preaching

Understanding the book of Genesis means appreciating it for what it is. While the story of Genesis certainly tells the story of creation (however literal or metaphorical one believes it to be), perhaps more importantly, Genesis reveals the nature of God's *ongoing* creative activity – that is to say, God didn't simply stop working after seven days, but God continues to be intimately and actively engaged in our world. This activity not only reassures us that God is with God's people, it also affirms that creation has meaning and purpose. And as creatures formed in the image of God, so do we. Even though we may not always understand our role in God's creation, Genesis reminds the people of God that God is not finished with us yet.

As the story of Noah reaches its conclusion, and just before God appears to Abraham for the first time, there is a brief interlude. The story of the Tower of Babel acts as a bridge between two covenants: The first being God's promise to never again destroy the earth, and the second, to create a mighty nation through whom God's purposes would be fulfilled. From this point forward, rather than destroy creation for humankind's disobedience, the Lord will now labor to redeem it – and redeem it through the participation of a *chosen* people! The Tower of Babel story marks a transition between from one promise to the next. What appears on the surface to be a creation myth explaining the variety of peoples and languages is, in reality, a serious exploration of the complex relationship between human activity and divine will. And when these two behaviors find themselves in conflict with one another, Genesis teaches us which one will prevail.

However, to truly appreciate this relationship, we must move beyond what we learned as children. We must rescue the Tower of Babel story from the Icarus fable. Icarus, as we know, dies a foolish death trying to be like the gods. Thus, the Tower of Babel story is taught as a cautionary tale concerning the dangers of human arrogance – destruction being just punishment for those who reach too high and assume that they can be like God. Because of our ambition, God must put us in our proper place. But there are obvious problems with this interpretation. There's no mention of God's wrath in the story, or of destruction, for that matter. If anything, once people can no longer communicate, they merely drift apart. Like other stories of its type, when we reduce biblical lessons to two-dimensional morality tales that are only concerned about, "sin and punishment," the true richness of the story becomes lost.

The crisis in our story is not born from evil or arrogance, but rather from ignorance and fear. Human beings build the city and the tower out of concern for their safety – which, one must note, is a legitimate mortal concern. "*Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens...otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.*" From there, we are introduced to the true power of human ingenuity – the limitless creative potential of those formed in the image of the Creator-God. Even God appears impressed saying, "*Look, they are one people...this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing...will now be impossible for them.*"

Again, concerns for safety and security are legitimate. Problems arise when our concern for safety and security causes us to act in a manner that is contrary to God's will. If we return to the sixth day of the creation story, God blesses humankind with a mandate to, "*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...*" [1:28] Yet barely ten chapters later, we instead find humankind cowering behind walls and towers for their own protection. Not only does this frustrate God's will, their isolation serves as a rejection of God's blessing when people use their creative gifts to serve their fear instead of trusting in God. We hear a familiar refrain in the creation story: God saw it, and it was good – God saw it and it was good. When God judges something to be "good", God blesses it. Yet when God determines something to be "not good" God takes bold and decisive action to make it "good" again. Therefore, God scatters the peoples of the earth, not as a punishment, but so that the people will finally do what God needs them to do.

Perhaps that's the lesson. In Genesis, we witness God creating things, "of every kind". Human beings are no exception to this command. We regard the scattering of the peoples as a punishment, when in reality, it's the fulfillment of God's sovereign will. Diversity, not conformity, represents the natural order of creation. It is how things are meant to be. Yet how many times have we seen churches and communities acting contrary to God's blessing, by isolating themselves behind walls with people who look the same, talk the same and think the same? How many times have we seen God-given gifts devoted to maintaining a brick-and-mortar structure, instead of supporting global mission? How many times have our priorities been determined by what we think we can safely afford, instead of the needs of our community? How often are our decisions guided by self-preservation at all costs, instead of doing things that are fruitful according to God's command?

God promises us much, but God has never promised that life as the people of God would be easy. It is a special task to which we have been called. And if we are to be worthy of God's blessing, life as the people of God will involve risk. This will involve stepping outside of our comfort zone to use our gifts and our talents in God's service. When we come upon the assembled disciples at the day of Pentecost, it has been fifty days since the night of Jesus' arrest. They once hid away in fear, but with the resurrection, they now prepare themselves mentally, spiritually and physically for the task of being *sent*. And when the Holy Spirit finally appears and rests upon them like tongues like fire, they are empowered with the ability to speak to and understand those who are different from themselves. From there, these apostles joyfully leave their refuge to face persecution, imprisonment, oppression and even death, in order to proclaim the crucified and risen Christ to the world.

Obviously, one cannot ignore the symmetry of these two stories from Genesis and Acts. In Genesis, when God determines that God's people are not doing as they are told, God scatters the people so that God's will may be accomplished. And now that the time is right, God takes bold action once again, by equipping the apostles with a spirit of understanding that they need to fulfill God's mission to be Christ's witnesses "*to the ends of the earth.*" [Acts 1:8] The Spirit of the Lord never insists upon conformity. The rich diversity of God's people is preserved (dare I even say, celebrated) on the Day of Pentecost, because it reveals God's purpose for creation. We are not the same, because we are not meant to be the same. To suggest otherwise is an offense against all that is holy. Through us – or should I say, through *all of us* – God is creating something good. Even though we may come from strange lands and speak foreign languages, even though we may belong to a variety cultures and races, even though we are so very different from one another, the presence of the Holy Spirit teaches us how we are one people in Christ's name.

Our two stories take place in different times and places, yet in both stories, God's divine activity is recognized by its boldness. In the same way, the people of God are recognized – not by their race, their language, their nationality, or even by their religion – but by their courage and their audacity – by their willingness to leave safe spaces and venture to those places where we are told not to go, to welcome into community those who society will not accept, in order to proclaim an unpopular message of justice, peace and reconciliation. It's difficult task, just as it was meant to be. Even so, Christ has already done the hard work for us in this new act of creation. Every obstacle has been

overcome; every barrier has been broken. And he accomplished this, not by means of force, but by leaving himself vulnerable to the scorn of a broken world. Now that's true power. That's true courage. That's true faith. And that's the kind of power, courage and faith which are meant to be *embodied*. All that are needed are willing hearts and open minds who are able to harness the full measure of our creative potential to gather all people together under God's new covenant of grace and love.

In other words, God's people are known by what they do, not by what they can't do. The people who build the tower of Babel naïvely assume that they are taking action to preserve themselves, when in reality, they are held captive by their fears. Trying to be like God wasn't really their problem. Their problem was that they were not trying *hard enough* to be like God. God has a plan. God knows what to do. God acts decisively to make things good. Mortals say things like, "We can't do that. If we don't show strength, we'll be weak and vulnerable. If we give too much, we'll be impoverished or powerless. If we don't keep others out, we won't be feared or respected. We can't do that. We can't be like God!" All of this is a carefully constructed lie upon which to justify complacency and cowardice. And with such cynicism, true hope can never take flight.

Contrary to what we were taught as children, we can be like God! In fact, we are supposed to be like God! God's people must bear the image of God's love and grace to the world! (If we won't, then who will?) Through the embodiment of the Spirit, God does indeed put us in our proper place, but God does so by raising us up to be the people who God needs us to be!

So, imagine: What if we put our minds toward building something truly worthy – something that God will see and bless as "good"? What if we devoted our ingenuity to achieving peace between nations, the reconciliation of the races, or toward the elimination of poverty or hunger *in our lifetime*? What if we opened our churches and communities to refugees, to the oppressed or other marginalized persons? What if we recommitted ourselves to eradicating disease, preserving the environment or creating systems of laws, justice and economics which recognize the dignity and value of all human beings? What if we went out beyond these walls proclaim the Good News of Christ's resurrection to those in the world who need to hear it most?

It sounds crazy, right? And yet nothing is impossible for those who possess the courage for the task. God is not finished with us yet, so perhaps we can do our part to create something new in God's name.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.

Prayers of the People & The Lord's Prayer [*Let us pray...*]

Almighty and merciful God, we once again turn our hearts and thoughts to you, so that this world may be transformed according to your purpose. Help us to bear witness to the many ways in which your creative presence is made evident in our lives; in the gifts and talents that we share, though the rich diversity of peoples and with the love that we have for one another. Open our hearts and minds to your will, so that your Spirit may again inspire your servants with the love, courage, compassion, understanding necessary to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

As always, we ask that you extend your healing presence to all who suffer in mind, body and spirit, and we ask that you comfort the afflicted, the lonely and the grieving. We ask that you ease the pain of those who suffer from mental illness or disease. We pray for people with special needs, and those who are responsible with their care. We ask that you protect and uphold those who live amid violence and conflict. Awaken us to the dangers that we have inflicted upon the earth, so that we may become stewards of that which has been entrusted to us. We ask that you grant your wisdom to our leaders, so that they may govern according to your will, extending the cause of justice, peace and goodwill to all people. Lastly, we ask that you help us to remember

with thanksgiving the faithful example of all of those who have left us in this life, and who now rest with you.

As members of one body bound together by your Spirit, Lord, we lift our prayers to you, using the words taught us by your Son, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Charge & Benediction

God has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you,

but to do justice,

to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

May the God of hope fill you with all joy

and peace in believing,

so that you may abound in hope

by the power of the Holy Spirit.