

May 15, Day of Pentecost: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

by [Gail Ramshaw](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

We hear in today's Genesis selection an ancient story—what scholars call an etiological myth—that explains to a rural people the origin of the multiplicity of human languages. Perhaps the story arose after a small community began to encounter traders who spoke foreign tongues; perhaps it was after tent dwellers saw a ziggurat for the first time. The storyteller ties together the Hebrew root *bl*, meaning “to confuse,” with the name of the Babylonian city Babel, and the legend as enshrined in the Pentateuch can comfort its hearers with the sense that at least they still speak God's original language, the one with which God conversed with their ancestors. And at least their tribe continues to live and worship close to the ground, since it is God alone who dwells in the heavens.

The story might also broaden the ethical life of the community, since the tale claims that at the beginning, all humans were one. God's intention was a unified human species, a people who could talk with one another. For the insiders who hear this tale, God has saved them yet again, this time from the arrogance of the outsider, from the confusion posed by hearing foreign languages, and from the misuse of the raw materials of God's creation. Centuries later, Abram and Sarai still live in a tent and have the words to speak with God.

It is the theological underpinning of the story that retains its importance for contemporary Christians. According to Genesis 3–10, sin originates with the very first humans, spreads to their children, is washed away in the flood, but then reappears in Noah's son. According to the tower tale in Genesis 11, this sin has now spread throughout “the face of the whole earth.”

We who study ancient and modern cultures and religions know that some human communities teach their children that people are essentially good to others and benign to themselves, with misbehavior being only a temporary aberration that can be bent back straight again. But over and over the Bible teaches the opposite: even though we and the tradition cannot agree on why this is the case and who all is to blame, the fact remains that humans turn much of their energy toward the misuse of resources in order to make a name for themselves. The multiplicity of human

languages has become a sign of—even the result of—one tribe against another. Our skyscrapers keep going higher than those our rivals have erected. Hearing this story is—sadly, ironically—good news. Hearing truth always is.

Then from Acts comes Luke's imaginative way to build upon ancient stories. Luke sets the Christian community's gathering to coincide with Pentecost. This Jewish festival of weeks was an agrarian festival that celebrated the gift of the law from Mount Sinai. But now the tongues of fire are no longer seen from afar on top of God's mountain, signs of the terrifying power of the Almighty. Rather, the fire has been dispersed onto the forehead of each believer. The tribal memory of life as herders perhaps encountering a volcano has given way to a communal adventure in the midst of Jerusalem, to which people travel from all parts of the Roman Empire. Tents are no longer big enough: we will live in cities, filled with people who are surprisingly different from ourselves.

The multiplicity of languages, previously viewed as signaling our alienation from one another, becomes God's vehicle for bringing salvation to the entire world. "Let there be light" and "you will not make for yourselves an idol" Christians will now translate into every known language, so that everyone can hear of God's deeds of power. It is poignant that the historic Christian mission to translate the scriptures into every language under the sun is now judged by some as an imperious replacement of a dominant language over oral tribal speech. How ought we now to hear the call in Acts to evangelism?

Pentecost is a day about religion, that human pattern of behavior that tells stories and repeats rituals in order to move people toward communal well-being. In our time, many people live with only religion's residue giving some support for their lives. But we need only to hear the daily news to know that in our century religion is thriving, for better and for worse. Countless people want to hear once again the stories of their ancestors, to prepare the feast also this year, to join with others in hope that a benign power will guide their future, to face life with wisdom and death without fear. For some, their security depends upon the diminishment of others.

For Christians, Pentecost reminds us annually what our religion is all about and calls us to join together toward its goals. Christians need not lament life in the city or romanticize the past lived on a farm. This primarily urban existence is the world in which God has placed us, with neighbors from every place on earth. We can jump over the barrier of foreign speech and learn others' languages in order to speak with

them of a God who desires to save the whole world.

We need not be afraid about our own death, even about the end of this earth, the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood. For the Spirit of God is coming to make all things new. We repeat what Paul wrote centuries ago, that neither we nor any people are any longer to be slaves. Rather, the Spirit makes us into children of God and thus siblings of one another and of the risen Christ.

And once a year we can urge all the baptized to wear red, a memory of those tongues of fire alighting on the foreheads of the disciples. True, we can't always see those flames, but by faith we know that they are there.