
From One, Many; and from Many, One

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 24 May 2026 • Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21 • John 20:19-23



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We celebrate today the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, and we celebrate also that great gift which we have received ourselves. Jesus promised the disciples that he would not leave them bereft when he returned to heaven, but that he would send a comforter, or advocate. Both words are used from time to time about the Holy Spirit: a comforter, because through the Spirit Jesus is always with his people, in good times and bad; and an advocate, because Jesus speaks for us before God. Advocate is a legal term for one who represents another. Jesus is the one who represents us before God. That is why we say at the end of a prayer or collect, “Through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Our prayers go through Jesus to God.

The coming of the Holy Spirit was a dramatic event. Imagine the excitement and wonder of the crowd as the Spirit descended like tongues of fire on the heads of the people! It brought great joy. It also brought a strange reaction.

The people started speaking — we assume they were telling everyone around them what it felt like to receive the Spirit. But the odd thing is, they were speaking different languages, languages they hadn't known before. There were people from many of the countries and cultures that surrounded Jerusalem that day, and many different languages were being used. All the people there could understand what the disciples were saying — in their own language!

A side note: you will have heard about people doing what is called “speaking in tongues.” That is different from what happened in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost. Speaking in tongues involves strange, inarticulate sounds, coming forth from the mouth of a believer. It is not words of a known human language. The speaker is in a kind of trance, which is God-inspired. But only another person who is also inspired by God can understand what is said. Paul had this to say about speaking in tongues:

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

(1 Corinthians 14:1-5)

What happened at Pentecost was that people were speaking in known languages. It was God's intention that everyone there understood what was happening, and could share in the joy of that event. So he had them speak in all the languages of the region, and they were understood by all people in the crowd. And remember, it was a big crowd. Later in the chapter we are told that three thousand people became Christians (Acts 2:41)! That was a good day!

The speaking of the different languages reminded me of an event from way back in the Old Testament, in the very first book, Genesis. Do you remember the Tower of Babel? It happens after Noah and the flood. Chapter 10 of Genesis tells of all the descendants of Noah's sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, whose descendants were many, and “from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32). They all spoke the same language — all the people living on the earth at that time spoke one language and could all understand each other. It came to pass that they all gathered in a certain place, and decided to build a tower which would reach high into the heavens, in order to make a name for themselves. And then:

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.’
(Genesis 11:5-7)

And that is what God did. He made everyone speak different languages, and they were not able to work together, and so the plan to build the tower failed.

You see why this reminds me of our Pentecost story. At Babel, the place named for the Hebrew word for “confusion,” the Lord gave everyone different languages. At Jerusalem on Pentecost, the Lord caused everyone to understand the languages spoken by the disciples. I think this speaks to God’s care of us, and to what we might call the maturity of the human race. God gives to us at any given time what we need in a way that we can understand at that time.

Look at the temple sacrifice: the blood of animals could never take away sin, but the making of sacrifices taught us obedience to God. If the ancient Jews faithfully made the required sacrifices, God’s grace would be with them.

People were not ready to have a worship based solely on faith at that time. But later, God decided we were ready to receive a new system, based on faith in Jesus Christ, and Jesus was sent to us as a human. Jesus brought us together in one body, one Communion. The people at Babel weren’t ready for that yet.

They banded together for mischief, to see if they could be as great as God. So God put a stop to that by multiplying their languages. God patiently waited until we were mature enough as a race to come together in unity (although I sometimes have my doubts that we’ve reached that point even now!) and unified us in the Holy Spirit. There is one God and we are all God’s children as one. The faith that brings us together as one body was born at Pentecost, just as much as at the Last Supper. By God’s grace, there is one Holy Spirit which ties us all together. And for that we give thanks. To God be the glory forever.

Amen.