

The Feast of Pentecost, 23 May 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev Raggs Ragan, Rector

Alleluia! Here we are at Pentecost, the last of the Great Fifty Days of Easter. The last day for the Paschal Candle. The last day for all the extra Alleluias. There are again Alleluias in the pews to carry in your pocket, to give to a friend who needs it. This time the Alleluias have little flames on them, flames of the Spirit whose special gifts we celebrate today. If we were one of those ancient European churches with a Holy Ghost hole in the ceiling, we could drop our Alleluias down from above and they would come fluttering among us, like the lighted wicks that used to be dropped on Pentecost, but with much less danger to the building and the people. Pentecost, a day of fire, a day of Spirit, a day for Baptisms.

If I were asked to sum up the meaning of Pentecost, I would say, “Yes, we live in the midst of Chaos, but there is hope for order and understanding, because Love is greater than the Chaos.”

The description of what happened on the Feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection, is an intentional reflection on the Tower of Babel story from Genesis.

In the beginning God had created people to live in harmony with one another, with all creation, and with the divine. But God created the humans with their own free wills, to choose harmony or chose chaos, to choose love or choose alienation, to choose life or choose death. The choice was for freedom and self-determination. In the Tower of Babel we see people who have grown in skill. They are building cities, having achieved considerable technology. They are proud of themselves, but they are worried. They know that the seeds of dissension exist and seek greater and greater control over their lives. What results is chaos and conflict. They do not return to a deep and open relationship with the divine in which human unity has its roots, but turn to their own fears of disunity and chaos – and those fears are realized. People often see in Babel an example of how we mess up our lives when we try to reach heaven on our own. I think that the people could not understand one another, because their anxiety and competition grew and they ceased to pay attention to one another. Everyone wanted everyone else to listen to them, to speak their language. When everyone talks and no one listens, chaos is inevitable.

This story is originally an etiology, a story explain why things are as they are – in this case why do we not all speak the same language? Why can't we all understand one another? At a superficial level, the story shows a paranoid God, who confuses human language so that people cannot threaten divine power. In reality, it is the human striving and fear that brings chaos.

Is chaos and miscommunication truly the will of God for the human race? Pentecost is the answer to that, and the answer is a resounding, “No!”

In first century Jerusalem, many languages were spoken. To get along at all, any individual probably needed to speak at least three. Each language was associated with an ethnic group, a political structure, and a history of conflict. The languages are entangled with the power struggles and urge to domination of the peoples of the time. Dislike, Distrust. Misunderstanding. These were normal and were reflected in the multiplicity of languages. People were used to walking into the street or square and hearing a Babel of voices, the chaos spoken of in Genesis. They were used to not understanding and not trusting, to having to seek interpreters to know what was being said.

That Pentecost morning seemed like any other feast day, a day of crowds and confusion. That is what people expected. When they heard a great noise and then saw the formerly cowering Apostles speaking with great enthusiasm, their first thought was of chaos. Oh, their probably drunk. They don't know what they're doing. A Babel moment.

But wait. The man from Cappadocia suddenly realizes that out of the chaos of voices he can recognize his own language, and in that language the story of God's infinite love, of Jesus' sacrifice, of the promise of peace. Next to him a woman from Persia realizes that she can hear God's story in her Persian, clear as can be. That man over there hears the story in Phrygian, the language of his childhood. That woman hears the Latin of her distant home.

This is God's answer to Babel. God wants understanding. God brings order out of the chaos that humans create. Everyone can speak and everyone can understand without needing anyone to interpret.

However many languages we know, we find our hearts warmed by being addressed in our native tongue when we are surrounded by people speaking many other languages. In a situation of fear and chaos, clear words in the language of our childhood ground us and bring us peace. That is God's will for us, not that we should be scattered across the earth unable to understand each other, but that we should all understand, each in our own way – and so be united to one another and to God.

Pentecost is a truly joyful day, a day to celebrate the love and unity that God showers into the midst of our chaos, and to take to heart the words we hear, so that we can live as islands of loving order in the midst of chaos.

When the spirit came upon the Apostles, they were able to move beyond the fear that had kept them locked away, to go out among other people with an openness that shared their experience of God and brought understanding to those who listened. When the Spirit of God descends, the result is the ability to communicate and the ability to understand; it is peace in place of chaos, love in place of fear.

When we bring people to baptism, it is an invitation to share with us this experience of love and peace, this deep link to all other people, and to the divine reality at the heart of everything. We invite Theresa and Katie and Addison to join us as people who live out God's love in the world.

Last week I went to an ecumenical conference on Fostering Hospitality in the 21st century church. It was a wonderful occasion of sharing with a great variety of people and I brought back useful information, insights, and challenges that you will be hearing about over the months ahead. But there was one story that for me connected directly to Pentecost and to Baptism.

Father Paul Schroeder, a Greek Orthodox priest and leader in JOIN, an ecumenical effort to embrace homeless people in our churches and work to bring them fully out of chaos into positive, peaceful lives, wove into his presentation a delightful image he found in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Life of Saint Francis*. There were bats in a church, disturbing the worshippers, who saw them as scruffy, dirty frightening things who should be done away with – until someone explained to them that over the years the mice in the church had eaten the crumbs of the Host, the blessed bread of the Eucharist. And in their eating of those divine gifts, the mice had sprouted wings and become the angels of the mice kingdom. Father Paul likes to hold on to that image and apply it to us, all of us, as God's scruffy angels. Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, whatever our shortcomings, like the mice, we are able to receive divine gifts, in Baptism, at the Eucharist, in the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, in a multitude of ways. And when we receive those gifts we sprout wings to become angels for the blessing of the world.

The sacraments are not magic, but they are transformative. They bring us closer to the heart of God and they can transform us into God's blessing to the world.

When we invite people to the waters of Baptism, we invite them to receive God's transforming gift in their lives. We invite them to become God's scruffy angels, along with us a whole troop of angels, ready to bless the world.

The gift of Pentecost is to find the love and peace in the chaos, is to be able to speak God's loving truth to a noisy world, is to be able to hear the promise of peace spoken just for us in the language of our heart, is to recognize in a bat an angel of God, is to receive God's grace and become a scruffy angel for our own kingdom, just like the bats. Alleluia!