

“O Happy Day!”

Genesis 11:1-9 Acts 2:1-21

“In the last days, it shall be,” God declares, “that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”

Today we remember the Pentecost and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church.

Fifty days after the Passover came for the Jews the celebration of the Pentecost. Fifty days after Easter comes for us also a celebration of the Pentecost, of that 50th day. But the Christians on that day remember that the Holy Spirit came to the Church then, keeping the promise that Jesus had made to it; coming in a wind and coming with a seeming fire. Coming so that all the voices of the various people who believe in the same Lord could be understood.

We have two texts for this day. We have an Old Testament story that comes from Genesis 11, and then again we have a New Testament story from Acts 2. They are two sides of the same coin. Let me begin by reminding you how wonderful the insight of the Hebrews was to one of the greatest gifts that God gave humanity.

When God had created the world and then created human beings as well, God gave human beings the ability to talk. Speech – language was that defining quality which separated those who were made in God’s image from everything else in creation. The Hebrews understood that that language was a lot of things for us. It was power. It was the way in which human beings could

have a good and blessed dominion over creation. That's what was meant when God said to Adam and to Eve that they could name the beasts of the field, or that they could name their children, or one another. And that's the second thing language was. Language was and is our quality of relationship, our ability to be one, even though we are separate.

A third thing: Language is our self-identification. It's the way in which I, Pastor Doug, make myself known to you. You hear my words, and in my words you begin to enter into something of who I am. And finally, language is always a sign. It is a sign to reveal how well we do with one another – whether we are good, or whether we are evil. That's what brings us to these two stories.

You will remember the first one. It's an early story, even before Abraham comes on the scene. You may remember, it begins by saying, in Genesis, Chapter 11, that everyone who lived on the earth had one tongue, and everyone could understand everyone else. There is that sign and that quality of community, of being one.

But then human beings were able to make bricks, and in their pride they decided that they would build a tower that reached all the way to heaven. Well, that was self-centered pride. Now, language is a sign of where our spirits are, and God used that sign and God used language to show what happened when we acted in profound pride. God came down and confused the tongues of the people. The Tower of Babel stands as a remembrance, a memorial of that time when pride made our language not unite us, but divide us.

I say, “I love you,” and when my heart is whole and holy and good the stress is on “you”. “I love you. I am willing to make a sacrifice for you”.

But when my heart is self-centered and proud and not good, then the stress is on “I”. “I love you, and the proof of that love will be, can you satisfy me”. The same language, and it can either combine us or divide us. It’s a sign.

On Pentecost, the same God who confused our tongues sent a new Spirit among us, the Holy Spirit, and one of the powers of this love of God, this coming of the Holy Spirit, is that, although we have many languages, in God all of our languages become one. When we are forgiven of our sins, then we speak in a genuine love for God and for one another.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they (the disciples) were all gathered together in one place, and suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues, as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. **Here comes the impact.** Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout people from every nation under heaven, and at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered because each one heard them speaking in his and her own language.*

You see the binding? You see the blessed beginning of the Spirit? Now language makes us a community. It declares our oneness.

And (these people) were amazed and wondered, saying “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us, in his and her own native language?”

This was a marvel. It was the marvel of the unity of the church on earth. *It’s our birthday!* It’s the beginning of our unity, our oneness – our marvelous union in that, when we say “I love you,” that you, by the grace of God who loves us, genuinely embraces the other.

In order to celebrate this birthday today, I’m going to share a story. It will refer surely to the Pentecost. It will tell the story of the Pentecost Day and at the same time it will rejoice in every one of these days when, speaking in the Spirit, we genuinely listen to each other, honestly hear each other, and are bound together in one.

It’s a story and a poem written by Walt Wangerin for Lutheran Vespers in 1995.

Mary was sleeping in her bed,
Her brown, brown ears as still as mice,
Waiting to hear, distant and clear,
Songs of the morning sacrifice.

Small Mary smiled; brown Mary dreamed;
Young Mary waited for that song
Which woke her every day at dawn
And kept that day from going wrong.

She turned, she waited, stretched and frowned;

She woke and sat straight up in bed;

Her dark brown eyes looked all around,

The, "Something's wrong today," she said.

No matter how she tipped her head,

She could not hear a sound, a sound.

"Oh, listen!" she whispered to nobody

(For no one else was by her there),

"I can't hear birds. I can't hear trees,

Or priests or people praying prayers –

No games, no laughing anywhere!

No wind is blowing and no breeze –

What's wrong this morning? Tell me, please!

Jerusalem, are you still there?"

Mary jumped up and ran outside

To search the city Jerusalem.

Maybe her friends had gone to hide.

Or maybe someone old had died

And everyone was sad for him

And that's why all Jerusalem
Was still, so still, so dark and dim!

But no! That wasn't it at all!
For there were birds, perched on a wall
Cocking their heads so they wouldn't fall –
On the wall, on the fence; in the well by the bench;

Beaks, wings, feathers, white.

Doves, doves – but an eerie sight,
For none of them chirped a chirp, non of them called a call;

Silent they sat, as if waiting here,
Still, as if something would appear –
And Mary stared with fear, with fear.

Then she saw people walking round,
Back and forth across the ground,
As if there were no place to go.

None of them smiled, all of them frowned,
And no one spoke the slightest sound,
No one said "Thank you" or "Please" or "Hello".

“What’s wrong today? Can someone say?”

Poor Mary called to them, but they –

They only looked, then turned away.

A tall man sighed and scratched his nose;

A small man sat and cleaned his toes.

A pygmy climbed an olive tree,

But there was nothing there to see.

A woman, skinny as a dime

Counted her fingers to pass the time.

Yellow folk bowed to one another

While black folks whispered, “Brother, brother.”

To no one in particular.

Red men, dusty men, men with hair

Which hung from here way down to there;

All of them wandered to and fro,

Silent, for no one seemed to know

A thing. Not a thing.

Not a single song to sing.

Poor Mary sat; sad Mary cried;

(Three doves made room and moved aside).

“This day,” she wept, “is wrong! It’s odd:

I think I’ve lost my Lord and God;

He went away; He went to hide.”

Young Mary bent her head and cried.

But suddenly “BAR BAR’ she heard.

“What did you say?” she said to a bird,

But the dove said nothing, not a word.

“BING, BONG, AND BEN,” she heard again –

Right by her ear: “BAR. BAR AND CHEER!”

Well, Mary looked up, and there stood a girl

Whose skin was white as a milky pearl,

Whose voice was as kind as butter and bread:

Oh! If only she knew what this strange girl said!

She touched the girl, the girl touched her,

They smiled, and both turned prettier;

They laughed, they danced, they gave a shout . . .

But whenever this white girl moved her mouth,

“BAR BAR” she said; “BAR BAR” came out.

Here was a friend to make Mary glad

But they couldn't talk, and that was sad.

But then a breeze began to blow.

It lifted Mary's hair just so;

It whirled around, it blew down town,

It made the pygmy's tree bend down

And made the doves get up and go –

A rushing, driving, mighty wind!

The people felt it push their backs

And ran down town like candle wax;

The tall, the small, the girls, the boys

Chased the wind and followed the noise;

Yellow men, black men, sallow men, fat men,

Children and women and Mary and all

Streamed down the streets like a waterfall

To get to the house, to get to the hall

Where the wild wind blew then, great and small,

While the doves flew above and called their call

Like a song in the morning after all!

And when they got there, when they came,

They saw twelve men, each with a flame,
Like a sparkler burning on his head.
“Mary, Mary” the white girl said,
“Do you see what I see? Do we see the same?”
First Mary said nothing; then Mary said, “How?”
How do I understand you *now*?
And how,” she laughed, “do you know my name?”

But a man named Simon raised his hand

And cried for silence: “Understand!”

He call in an Apostolic voice;

“You people of every land . . . Rejoice!”

(Yes! Mary and everyone understood.)

“This day,” he cried, “it’s name is GOOD.

For Jesus Christ, the crucified,

Whom God raised up when he had died

Who sits right now at God’s right side –

He’s doing what he said he would!

Listen! As he was ascending into the sky

He promised us power from on high,

Power to preach and to prophesy –

And that is why this day is good!

For today, by fire and a wind and a dove

Jesus is sending his Spirit and love!

The last and best beatitude!

“Just look,” cried Simon, “what the Spirit has done!

It caused you sleepy people to run,

It melted ten thousand wills into one.

It has made you one body, one nation, one tongue:

YOU ARE THE CHURCH, God’s multitude!”

Then Simon stepped forward and spoke to eight fellows,

Two black ones, two whites, two reds and two yellows.

“From now on,” he said, “when you talk to each other,

You will hear the Spirit of God in your brother.”

Next, softly, strong Simon knelt down to brown Mary:

“Daughter,” he said, “you’re not ordinary.

Nor is the child beside you here.

For when each of you looks in your sister’s face

You can see the light of the Lord’s good grace,

Beautiful, bright and clear!”

Glad Mary grabbed the white girl's hand
And laughed and danced and hugged her hard,

“So that's why I can understand

The meaning of your BAR-BAR-BAR!

My friend! My friend! My baby sister!

The dear Lord lives in you!” she cried.

Then she lowered her voice to the softest whisper:

“And in me too – we're family,” she sighed.

It was then that the white child grinned and kissed her.

Kissed her cheek till Mary was weeping.

“Bar Bar,” she said, “Bar Bar,” which meant:

“You should know that the Holy Spirit is keeping

The two of us close, both me and you!

I love you, Brown Mary. BAR BAR. I do”

And that was the end of the Happy Day,

And the beginning of friendship

Forever and aye.

Walt Wangerin wrote . . . “Well, I hope you like my story. You – I mean both you who are very young and who are very old, and who are young at heart. It really is a story for children

because it's about children, but there is something child-like in us that must rejoice in this happy birthday of the church every time it comes around.

Let me explain something to you. The strange girl says "BAR BAR" through out the story because that's how the Greeks heard "barbarians" to talk. They said their language always sounded as if they were going "BAR BAR, BAR BAR," and that's where the word barbarian comes from. It's the way in which the Greeks characterized people whose voices and whose tongues they didn't understand. Just as a side comment, that's also where the word, the name, Barbara come from. Barbara, Barbra, was the barbarian, was one who spoke the language others couldn't understand.

Well, I thought I would use that throughout the story to indicate that finally we do understand one another's language, even when the words are different.

The Holy Spirit in our hearts genuinely makes sisters and brothers of us all, a kinship, a family. As Mary said in the story – one holy church.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord: Be all your gifts in plenty poured to save, to strengthen and make whole every mind, every soul. Oh, by the brightness of your light, in holy faith unite – unite us all. And to your praise by every tongue in every land let our hymn be sung. Alleluia. Alleluia. Thank you, Spirit, for dwelling among us to bind us all into one, for that marvelous forgiveness, for the healing of divisions. Amen

May the peace of God . . .