

*The Second Bookend*  
Pastor Jim Bangsund

Even when you are 73 years old, you continue sharing stories about your kids. On Good Friday, I told about our daughter, Naomi, when she was 2 years old, and we had an encounter with a crucifix at the San Jose Mission. Well, fast forward another 15 years to her first year at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, and we have an event which ended up in the more whimsical corners of global mission publications around the world. I've told this story to some of you in the past. She had just flown in from Tanzania, where we lived as missionaries and where she had been raised. Now, she found herself in a freshman Philosophy 101 class.

The prof was engaging the students in a spirited debate about determinism and free will, nature vs nurture, and all that good stuff. Are we really free to make decisions in life, or is everything we do already predetermined by genetics and the experiences we've had? The prof was a determinist, but Naomi was taking the opposite view. "I think we're free to decide a fair amount of the things we do in life," she said. "OK, Naomi," the prof responded, "come up here and let's try out your theory." Now he didn't know anything about Naomi having been raised as a missionary kid in Tanzania. He thought she was just one more blonde, blue-eyed freshman of Scandinavian descent. Luther College is full of them!

So Naomi went forward, and the prof said, "OK, Naomi, so you are saying that we are basically free in life to decide what we're going to do. That means you should just be able to decide to ... oh ... speak Swahili, for instance." Puzzled, Naomi looked at him and blinked and said, "OK, I can do that." Whereupon she *did*. Well, you can imagine the chaos that followed in that classroom. Five years later, when our youngest daughter, Sharon, took the class, the prof was still telling that story and laughing about it.

Language. It can be such a wall – either of inclusion or of exclusion. There are even parts of San Jose where you won't be able to do much of anything unless you know Spanish. Or Vietnamese or Hindi. How might the world be different if the same language were spoken in America, China, Russia and Iran? How might the sharing of information during this COVID-19 pandemic have been different, quicker, more cooperative – if we simply spoke the same language?

Genesis 11, this morning's first lesson, tells us that the whole language thing came about when people decided to exceed their design specs, as I've sometimes called it, and try to become like God. We read that they set out to build a tower. "To make a name for ourselves," they said, but their plan to set its top "in the heavens" does seem to speak of more grandiose intentions. The first 11 chapters of Genesis bring us four stories which show people again and again trying to become like God. Way beyond our design specs, like I said. Leggo blocks saying, "Let's make ourselves into the Bay Bridge." Only disaster could follow. And so God finally puts an end to their arrogant pipe dream by confusing their language and thus scattering them across the face of the earth.

That story of the Tower of Babel is the first of two bookends in the Bible. Genesis 11. God uses language to scatter humanity because of human pride and arrogance and our attempts to become

what we are not. Attempts to play God; attempts which harm us as well as those around us. The story of Babel comes near the *beginning* of the Bible, and as we keep reading we see how God then moves, throughout the Old Testament, toward resolution of the whole mess.

That resolution finally comes in the form of a cross and an empty tomb. Through God's entering our world as one of us – through death and resurrection – sin and death are no longer the final word; their grip on us is overcome. And then, after all is said and done, after Easter and the Ascension, we come to the Bible's other bookend, where the effect of the first one is reversed. The first bookend was the tower; the second is Pentecost. Again God uses language, but this time not to scatter because of sin but rather to gather because of the Gospel. To gather people from all over the world to hear the glad news that, in Christ, God forgives our sin, makes us his children, and works to temper our tower-building tendencies so that we might instead live for him and for those around us.

Pentecost was actually a *Jewish* feast day long before it became a date on the *Christian* calendar. It was a day when devout Jews from all over the world came and gathered in Jerusalem. A day when God, then, used this perfect moment, through a miracle of language, to launch the Gospel's IPO ... into the ears of all who were present, whether they were Parthians, Medes, Elamites or residents of Mesopotamia. The text mentions *speaking* in tongues, but it also describes it as a miracle of people *hearing* the good news in their own languages. Whether the miracle was speaking or hearing, it was still an amazing event sent by God. The Bible's second bookend.

It was also at Pentecost that the disciples, so often clueless when Jesus was with them, were finally able, through the power of the Holy Spirit,

to connect the dots,  
to understand the words of the prophets,  
to catch the vision of bringing the Gospel to the world;

and so the Church was born. Pentecost Sunday became the birthday of the Church and the Gospel's IPO.

So what has happened since? The Church has grown throughout the world, to be sure. But so, at times, have misunderstandings – misunderstandings of Pentecost and of the Holy Spirit.

I remember Mom and Pop Kincaid, a wonderful older couple that ran the Saigon Christian Serviceman's Center in Viet Nam back in 1970, an oasis for Christian soldiers like me who were able to get away from the war for a few days. Mom Kincaid was a tough Scrabble player, a master of short words with Xs and Js. The Kincaids were also Pentecostals, and were absolutely convinced that my Christian life would be improved by – and perhaps depended upon – my receiving the gift of speaking in tongues. Well, they gave it their best effort but it never took; not even one evening when they had a gathering of folks stand in a circle around me with their hands on my head. Yes, I was mighty uncomfortable. But I knew Mom and Pop Kincaid to be good and caring Christian folks, and the evening finally ended well – even though I'm sure they were disappointed at the apparent lack of results.

My friends, the Holy Spirit, the third partner in the Trinity, is real and wants to work in your life as well as mine. But we want to be clear about just what this means and what it doesn't. If you are put off by the strangeness you sometimes hear regarding the Holy Spirit, know that you're not alone. Part of the problem is just the language we use when talking about the Trinity. The

Trinity – the simple fact that within God there has been relationship from the beginning, right from the get-go. Yet, talking about God the Father and God the Son leads Muslims to think we believe there must also be a God the Mother waiting somewhere back in the wings – and then there's the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Holy Ghost. What on earth is all *that* about? I've often thought we might be better off simply speaking of God the Creator, God the Savior and God the Teacher – or Comforter, or Advocate, since the Holy Spirit does all those things.

Today, we're just focused on the Holy Spirit – who brings us to faith, teaches us, and gives gifts to the Church. These gifts of the Holy Spirit are certainly real, but, as is true of everything God gives us, these gifts can also be *misused*. The Apostle Paul even had to write a letter to a congregation that was getting lost in sensationalism – that first letter to the Corinthians that we looked at in a sermon series back in January and February. You can go back and look again at 1 Corinthians 12-14.

You see, Pentecost and the Holy Spirit are not about sensationalism. Pentecost and the Holy Spirit are about God continuing to build and strengthen his Church to this day. Whether you have been a Christian since childhood or whether you have recently come to faith, God is not yet finished with you – just as he is not yet finished working on me. And it is the Holy Spirit who continues to teach you and guide you, to comfort you when grieving or discouraged, and to show you where God would have you to be.

Jesus gives us our first clues. In Mark chapter 13, he tells the disciples that days were coming when they would be taken to task for their faith. But, in verse 11, he goes on to say:

Do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

Shortly before his death and resurrection, and his departure from his disciples, he again encourages them. They can't imagine going on without his daily physical presence in their midst, guiding them and teaching them. So he tells them that God will continue to counsel them with the sending of his Holy Spirit. In John 14 and John 15 – verse 26 in each case – he says,

The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ... When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. [John 14:26; 15:26].

That's what the Holy Spirit does, my friends. The Holy Spirit always points to Jesus. The Holy Spirit teaches and reminds followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit helps you when you read the Bible, when you witness to a friend, when you seek God's will in your life. And the Holy Spirit comforts in times of fear or loss or grief.

Now, God's Spirit may at times use remarkable means to draw people to faith, as he did on the day of Pentecost; but note the result. In Acts chapter 2, people didn't clap their hands and say Wow! Rather, they *clasped* their hands and cried, "What must we do to be saved?" It's the results which are produced that tell us whether God's Spirit is at work or whether it's merely our human desire for sensation or attention.

Two weeks ago, the Gospel lesson which Pastor Judy preached was sort of a preparation for Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In her sermon, she mentioned that startling

statement Luther made in his Small Catechism. In explaining the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, he says, "I believe that I cannot ... believe." That's an abbreviated version, of course. What he actually wrote is:

I believe that I cannot *by my own reason or strength* believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; *but* the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

My friends, we simply don't come to faith on our own. As fallen creatures, we're simply wired to turn our backs on God. Faith happens only when the Holy Spirit patiently works in your life and mine.

My friend, God cared enough for you not only to die for you but also to send his Spirit to call you, to work within you, to create and nourish the very faith you need. It may not be an ecstatic or sensational experience – though occasionally it is. It may not be something that causes you to jump up and say "Wow!" – though sometimes that can happen even to a Lutheran; our God is indeed a God of miracles.

There are times we look at ourselves and our limited abilities and resources and just shake our heads. But note this well: if that first Pentecost were merely a group of folks saying, "Jesus has gone, and now it's up to us to get this operation back on track; let's go out and do some street corner preaching," – if that's all it had been, the Church would have died on its first weekend. But it *wasn't* that. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit working in their midst – surprising even them – especially them – so that we later read in v. 41:

Those who accepted [the] message were baptized, and about *three thousand* were added to their number that day.

And it is the same Holy Spirit of God, still active today, who continues to lead St Timothy's forward, even during times such as these, as we look for our next lead pastor and as we pass through the uncharted territory of a pandemic. And, as it is with the congregation, so it is in your life, too, my friend. You can pray with confidence that God the Holy Spirit

would *lead* you in making the major decisions of life  
would *guide* you in your reading and understanding of God's Word  
would *help you share* that life-changing Word with friends  
would *persuade* those same friends that they, too, might come to know God in Christ Jesus.

And there is more. The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit not only as Teacher and Counselor but also as "Comforter," as that powerful presence of God who meets you where you are and gets you through the stress or the grief or the fear which at this present time can threaten to overwhelm. Gets you through not with trite platitudes such as, "Don't worry, everything is going to be fine," but rather with God's strong assurance that even when things are *not* fine, you are still in his firm grip and always will be.

Furthermore, we are still in community, supporting and praying for one another, through marvelous opportunities such as this online worship service, or our email Prayer List and devotionals, or even our Thursday morning Zoom coffee hour. Yes, God works even in and through unusual means such as these – and we thank God *for* them. Again, the reason God sends

his Holy Spirit is to build and strengthen his Church – just plain folks like you and like me – through many and various ways.

Pentecost, the Bible's second bookend; the birthday of the Church; the day when the Holy Spirit came to give power and understanding and direction to followers of Jesus like you and like me. When Jesus returned to heaven, he didn't abandon us or leave us to our own devices. He sent the Holy Spirit as Teacher, as Counselor, as Comforter. The Holy Spirit may not help you to speak Swahili in a philosophy class, but he'll help you, even during times such as these and through means we've never had to use before,

to speak to your neighbor,  
or comfort a co-worker,  
or share Christ with a friend or fellow student.

Because the Holy Spirit always finds a way to point to Jesus and to help us do the same.

Let us pray ....