

Year C, The Feast of Pentecost

June 9, 2019

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

I imagine that even the most Biblically illiterate are familiar with the Abrahamic traditions of the creation story – “God said let there be light...” *We’re* all very familiar with those words, and, to some extent, we take comfort in them. We know that story. And, sometimes we romanticize the creation story. We make it into a cute story, don’t we?

Children’s picture books might depict Adam – of course, a handsome, blond, middle-class American Adam – in the forest naming the animals, with shrubbery very delicately placed where needed. Isn’t that sweet? We never move on to the next part of the story, where God summarily evicts Adam and Eve from the garden, leaving a spinning, flaming sword to keep them from ever returning. That’s such a cute story!

And Noah’s ark? We know the plastic, Playskool nursery version of Noah’s Ark with the pairs of cute puppies and kittens and the ferocious lions with their heads turned coyly up looking expectantly at their new neighbor, the zebra family? They’re going to get along famously in the nursery ark! Playskool has wisely chosen *not* to include the thousands of little, plastic sinful people about to be washed away by the flood.

The story of the Tower of Babel, though. It’s never been cute. You can’t “*Playskool*” it up. On the surface, God comes across as impulsive, perhaps anxious, even a little intimidated by his creation – by us. “If I don’t stop these people now,” God seems to be thinking aloud, “they’ll be out of control.” And so, it *seems* that God punishes humanity for being ambitious. If God loves us so much, wouldn’t he want us to be his neighbor way up in the sky? Something else is going on here.

The Old Testament lessons of creation, the flood and Babel tell us something about our relationship with God. God loves us and gives us all creation, but we want more than what God has so graciously given us, and we'll do whatever we need to get it. And so, God punishes us. We don't learn our lesson the first time. We continue our wicked and corrupt ways, and so God washes the wicked away with a great flood and gives us another chance to start again. Which brings us to the Tower of Babel

Most theologians agree that the greatest sin of the people in the story of the Tower of Babel is pride and arrogance. *Let's make a tower that reaches to the very doorstep of God, so that we may be assured of our own fame and fortune. Let's put ourselves on an equal footing with God.* The people of Babel have gathered together not to accomplish God's will and God's desire that we multiply and fill the earth. They've assembled on the plain of Shinar not to build community, but to challenge God. The grand, great and glorious tower is all about the power and will of humanity... not the power and will and the presence of God.

Now, contrast this reading from Genesis with the reading from Acts – the reading that tells the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The people in our reading from Acts were gathered in Jerusalem, not for their benefit, not to challenge God, but to worship God. They were, every one of them, devout people of faith from diverse lands, speaking diverse languages – they were the antitheses of the people gathered at Babel. And rather than confusion and chaos, God brought them unity. At Babel, God thwarted humanity, scattering the people; at Jerusalem, God came down with the fire and passion of the Holy Spirit to breathe new life and energy into his people, to bring them together.... giving birth to his Church.

Babel and Jerusalem – it's a tale of two cities; a tale of two people. At Babel, the people trusted only in themselves. In Jerusalem, the people trusted in God and boldly went out into the

world, proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ. And so, take a moment... let's ask ourselves, are we the people of Babel, or are we the Pentecost-people of Jerusalem? Do we look inward, devoting our time and our energy and our spirit to making a name for ourselves, or do we reach outward, not shying away from challenges; trusting that with God all things are possible. Here's another way to put it: how will we be remembered? Have you ever thought about that?

How do we remember the St. Alban's of 60 years ago? St. Alban's welcomed our African American brothers and sisters in a time when schools and public gathering places were slamming the door in their faces. St. Alban's pushed for the equality of our sisters called to the priesthood in our Church at a time when it was unthinkable. St. Alban's recognized the need for affordable housing for low-income seniors, and did something about it, building Lockwood House and Elmwood House in Arlington. How do we remember the St. Alban's of 60 years ago? Progressive. On the side of civil rights; pushing the envelope on gender equality. Forward thinking; outward reaching. Thriving. Living as Jesus commanded us.

How will we be remembered 60 years from now? Will we be the St. Alban's that shrank from challenges? Will we be the St. Alban's that cowered at the thought of taking a risk to do God's work in our community? Will we be the St. Alban's that loved our Church, and quietly faded away?

I don't think so. We are a Pentecost-people. Each of us hears the Spirit speaking our own language, so we should be sharing our visions and our dreams and our hopes for the future – because they are visions, dreams and hopes that accord with God's will; working with God, not against God. We reach out our arms in love to the community, in the Name of the God who reached out to us in his dying embrace.

I've seen this place alive with the fire and the passion of the Holy Spirit. I've seen the good work you do, so I know how people will remember St. Alban's.

60 years from now, I believe people of Annandale will still be saying, "St. Alban's? That's a busy place, a great Christian community. They're always busy, but they're doing God's work."

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam