

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Pentecost Sunday ~ Confirmation  
May 23, 2010

## **Amazed & Perplexed**

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

Working with the confirmation class is always a charge for my spirit.  
Sometimes thrilling, sometimes shocking, sometimes hilarious,  
sometimes painful,  
but always, in the end, a powerful and a deeply fulfilling experience.  
I mean, where else can you hear God referred to as “The Big Cheese”?  
Always, when we get to the end of the Spring Retreat at Crestfield  
where the confirmands work hard at expressing what they’ve learned  
in their written statements of faith,  
always, I am amazed at just how much of the Christian faith  
has actually sunk in.  
They really do get it.  
And if you read their statements of faith, you’ll see that.

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Amazed.

That is how I feel so often when I witness the work of the Holy Spirit.  
But I must confess that, just as often,  
when I witness the work of the Holy Spirit,  
I am perplexed  
and I have try hard to trust that the Spirit is at work,  
even though I don’t understand it.

The work of the Spirit of God is always a mystery to us.  
There are times when we can witness a tremendous blessing happen  
in our lives, or in the life of another,  
and we point to that and say - this moment is of God!  
Clearly, this is grace:  
a long period of illness ends in recovery;  
a man who has been desperately looking for employment  
begins to land interviews and receive job offers  
and begins to believe in himself again.  
two people who are estranged, come together and reconcile  
and recommit to love one another in a new way.

But there are other times when all we can do is trust that the Spirit is at work  
because the blessing is not so easy to perceive;  
times of struggle, like the long period of illness before the recovery.

or, even harder, a long illness that does not lead to recovery  
but death;  
or a man whose career never fully bounces back,  
or the estrangement that never gets resolved.

These situations are perplexing.  
They call for the eyes of faith to see such circumstances  
as the arena of God's work,  
as a crucible in which God's ultimate purposes for our lives  
are forged.

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On the day of Pentecost,  
when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples  
those who heard them were *amazed and perplexed*.

We actually are told this twice:  
in verse 7, they were amazed and astonished;  
in verse 12, they were amazed and perplexed.

All of the disciples who are speaking are Galileans.  
Yet this gathering of Jews from is said to include representatives  
from *every nation under heaven*,  
and each one is hearing the disciples speak  
in his or her own native language.  
So often the work of the Holy Spirit is beyond our comprehension  
even as we are witnessing it, even as we are in the midst of it.

Now it is human nature to be more comfortable with things that are familiar,  
and to feel fearful or defensive against things that are unfamiliar.  
Certainly, this Pentecost moment is more than a little unsettling.  
The sound that comes upon them from heaven  
is not the gentle whisper of a breeze,  
but a *sound like the rush of a violent wind*.  
And the vision they behold is not a warm and peaceful radiance,  
but *divided tongues, as of fire* resting on the disciples.  
Sights and sounds that astonish and perplex us can be frightening.

This story, of course, recalls a much older story in the Bible:  
the Tower of Babel  
Only eleven chapters into the first book of the Bible,  
after creation, the first sin, the first murder, and the great flood,  
and the repopulation of the earth by the descendants of Noah,  
the story goes on, saying,  
In those days

*the whole earth had one language and the same words.*

So a large gathering of this human family begins to amass  
on plain in the land of Shinar,  
and as their numbers grow,  
they begin to aspire to greater and greater things.

Unfortunately,

just “as in the Garden of Eden,  
they seek to overreach into the knowledge and realm of God.”<sup>i</sup>

Feeling the power of their number and their common aspirations,  
they seek to make a name for themselves  
by building a great city and a tower that reaches to the heavens.

Like the story of Adam and Eve,

where “individual disobedience had its own consequences  
in expulsion from the garden,”

and like the story of Cain and Abel,

where “sibling rivalry gave way to” the first murder  
and then “pervasive human wickedness,”

so here at the Tower of Babel

“a collective [scheme] to become [as great as] God  
results in the scattering of the people [over the face of all the earth].”

Now we don't have to ask, in any historical sense,

whether this story is actually the way all the different languages evolved,  
or whether it actually happened.

It is a story, and a really good one,

that is intended to make a theological point.

This story is the last chapter of the creation narrative in Genesis.

A narrative which begins with chaos

being brought to order by the creative word of God,

now ends with chaos -

chaos *created* by God by the confusion of human language,  
and by the scattering of the people across the earth.

It is hard to imagine a more perplexing circumstance

“The prehistory ends *awaiting yet another* new...and creative word” of God.

That is to say, this first section of the Bible ends

exactly where we live our lives:

waiting for God to do his creating and saving work in our lives.

In the book of Genesis,

this ending of the pre-historic period provides the perfect set-up  
for opening of the biblical history in the very next chapter.

It is in Chapter 12 of Genesis

that we hear God give the first of many promises  
of a future in which he will gather all the scattered peoples of the earth

into one blessed community.  
God promises to Abram that, by following and trusting his perfect plan,  
“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

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Today, the Day of Pentecost,  
we celebrate the culmination of God's creative words,  
and we participate in the reversal of Babel scattering.  
For the work of the Holy Spirit  
is to bring people together,  
and to give mutual understanding,  
most of all, an understanding of the ways of God,  
and the work God is accomplishing through Jesus Christ.

These two stories, Babel and Pentecost, reveal dynamic of the human struggle.  
The inability to understand each other is pervasive and universal.

We see it in the public dialogue these days between people of different viewpoints,  
who may in fact be speaking foreign languages,  
but even if they're speaking the same language  
begin to sound to each other like they are speaking foreign languages,  
because they speak past each other,  
with hardly any ability to listen to or hear the other,  
so that dialogue disintegrates into louder and louder ranting,  
with less and less substance.

We see it in families caught in painful dysfunction,  
in which emotions eclipse reality,  
and patterns of blaming and defending  
undermine any chance of mutual understanding.

We see it in the cultures and religions of the world,  
which accentuate our differences,  
and give us a pretext for arrogance and disdain and disgust,  
and blind us to our common humanity and our own faults,  
and I do not exempt the Christian religion from this blindness.

When we are perplexed  
we become afraid, fearful of what we do not understand,  
and even angry at others for not being more like us,  
for not speaking our language.  
This the age-old predicament of human life.

And it is just this predicament that God addresses on the Day of Pentecost.

God creates the church.

Flawed as we may be,

the church becomes the interim embodiment of what God will finally accomplish  
at the end of the age.

We are the ones who proclaim the Great Gathering Work  
that God is doing in Jesus Christ.

What is now scattered, God will gather into his kingdom.

When these young men and young women stand before us today,

they are proclaiming their faith and their hope

that - although they too are amazed and perplexed by the Spirit's work -  
they believe Peter's interpretation

that what God has begun, God will accomplish in Jesus Christ.

They believe,

and they want us and all the world to know

that this good news

is the gospel truth,

the compass which orients their life,

and the light which directs their steps.

So let us join together in thanksgiving and praise

that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord

will be saved.

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<sup>i</sup> This and the following quotations on Genesis 11 are taken from Agnes Norfleet in her notes on Genesis in *The Life with God Bible* (New York: HarperOne), p. 31.