

**Texts: Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-35; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17**

We have come a long way on our Easter journey. Back in February, on Ash Wednesday, we drew crosses of ashes on our foreheads to remember that one day each of us will return to the dust from which we were made. Today, on Pentecost, the fire of the Holy Spirit comes down, to remind us that the God who gives life and breath also gives the power to speak and to act.

**From ashes to fire. From death to life. From weakness to power. From silence to speech. That's what this day is all about.**

We have just heard the story of the tower of Babel. In the book of Genesis, this story comes right after the story of God saving Noah and his family from the flood. God made a covenant never again to destroy the world with a flood, and Noah's descendants have populated the world. Humankind up until that point all spoke the same language. And being humans, they wanted to make a name for themselves, so they invented bricks and mortar and built a tower that reached as high as the sky. They built a skyscraper so that they could be like God – inventors, builders, creators. And when God came down to look at the tower, God realized that human beings are ambitious, that nothing they propose to do will be impossible. But God had made the covenant not to destroy humanity, so instead God decided to confuse human language, to make it impossible for humans to understand each other's speech and therefore cooperate with each other.

There are times when we are still people of Babel. Let us make a name for ourselves. Babel is about achievement – climbing to the top of the heap and leaving behind anyone who is too weak to keep up. Babel is about individualism – the idea that you alone are responsible for what you make of yourself. Babel is about accumulation – linking

**happiness to what you own. Babel is about building things – but these days we have perfected skyscrapers and turned to building walls instead. We build gated communities to prohibit anyone who doesn't belong from even walking through the neighborhood. We build prisons – the United States has the largest prison population in the world. And we build walls along the borders – one presidential candidate has even made that a central promise of his campaign.**

**And Babel is still about language. I've seen t-shirts in the tourist shops up in the Black Hills that say "Welcome to America. Now speak English." Most of us who were born in this country can only speak English; most of us never even learned the language our grandparents spoke. Even when we travel, Americans pretty much expect other people to speak English as well.**

**In virtually any city you visit – Denver, Chicago, Phoenix – you will hear dozens of other languages spoken when you walk down the street. Jerusalem was the same way 2000 years ago. It was full of Jewish Pilgrims from throughout the Mediterranean world.**

**The story of Pentecost is the reverse of the Tower of Babel. On that day, God made it possible for people to speak in languages that they didn't know, so that all the foreign pilgrims could understand the good news in their own language. God is all about diversity. The Holy Spirit uses human speech in all its diversity to spread the good news.**

**Martin Luther translated the Bible into German so that the people in his land could read it in their own language. And he also said this: "The church is a mouth-house, not a quill-house." Quill meaning the quill pen that people used to write in his day. The church is a mouth-house, not a quill-house. All the books of theology and devotions and**

instructions for how to pray and Biblical commentary that have ever been written are all well and good. They can be helpful. But the way God speaks to us is by *speaking* to us.

God speaks to us. In our own language. Through the words of scripture that Jill and Jace have read aloud. Through the words of the preacher, God help us all. In the songs we sing.

**How did you first learn about God? Someone told you. Someone brought you to church and taught you to pray and to sing and to repeat the words of scripture. Now it is your turn. The gift of Pentecost is being able to speak. The gift of the Holy Spirit is narrative. It is telling the story to someone else. It is speaking in a new language, the language of faith. It is the Word made flesh.**

Eugene Peterson, a pastor and spiritual writer, describes it this way: A word begins as a puff of air put in motion by our lungs. It is pushed up through the constrictions of the vocal chords, then worked on by the tongue, teeth and lips, to make a word. And then that word vibrates through the air, and bangs against a membrane of the ear. The word activates tiny acoustical gears that drive the sound into the synapses of the brain, at which point we repent of our sins or confess our faith in Jesus or love our enemy or visit the sick. All of these actions are physical. Word into flesh. Jesus was the Word of God. He was the language of God and he spoke the language of God. He revealed God not from the outside but from the inside.

**How many of you remember learning to talk? Most of us can't remember what it was like to learn our native tongue, because most of us don't remember much before the age of 3. But you probably remember your own kids learning to talk. They made babbling sounds first, sounds that didn't make a lot of sense, but which helped them practice. And**

then one day your son or daughter said that first real word. And it was a joyful day for you. You probably didn't correct their pronunciation. You probably didn't say "Sweetheart it's mommy, not mama." You were excited, and you praised them, and you encouraged them and you answered back and they were immersed – immersed in language. That is how we learn to talk. By talking.

This morning Katelyn and Murphy and True and in a few weeks Trevor, too, will affirm their baptisms and join the church as full members of this community. It's right and appropriate to do this on Pentecost because we know that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the lives of these young people since the day they were baptized. I am going to ask them if they intend to continue in the covenant God made with them – to live as a member of this community and to commit themselves to living in, with and under God's word. When they were baptized, none of these young people were able to speak for themselves, but now they can. And then we will ask God to stir up the gift of the Holy Spirit in each one of them, to blow into their lives, to speak to them in new ways, to help them grow even further in their faith.

This is not graduation. Although it feels a bit like the end of a process, it's not. It's the beginning. God is not done with you. God will continue to work in your lives, doing amazing things with you, fashioning your lives into something that you cannot imagine. God will continue to speak and to enable you to speak. To tell the truth. To be a blessing to other people. To be God's hands and God's feet and God's voice.

From ashes to fire. From death to life. From weakness to power. From silence to speech. That's what this day is all about.

**The story of Pentecost is not just some story of some miracle that happened 2000 years ago. It is a story for our time, too. In the words of Debie Thomas, we live in a world where words have become toxic, where the language of racism and sexism and chauvinism and jingoism and antagonism threaten to divide and destroy us. We must learn to speak across the borders that separate us or we will destroy ourselves.**

**God's word is a spoken word. God speaks to other people through each one of us. God's Spirit gives us the ability to speak. We, God's people, are part of God's story that continues to be told. So stop hiding indoors. Stop hiding behind walls. Go out there in the power of the Holy Spirit and speak God's word.**