

**Language of the Heart**  
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Genesis 11:1-9  
Acts 2:1-17

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The Moscow School of Comparative Linguistics has been attempting to trace the origin of the world's languages to a dozen or so protolanguages spoken some 11-14 thousand years ago. Their project, "The Tower of Babel", hypothesizes that all of these protolanguages go back to one common "World" language which may have been spoken in West Asia some 50 thousand years ago. ( <http://www.jum.ru/finproj/protol.htm>)

An intriguing theory...very much like the first verse of the eleventh chapter of Genesis: "At first, the people of the whole world had only one language and used the same words." One language. Surely this must have been a time of human harmony, spiritual well-being, and peaceful living! With one language there would have been one culture, a shared worldview, a sophisticated society.

So why does God scatter the people who build the Tower of Babel? Why do they lose their common tongue and begin to speak separate languages so they no longer hear or understand each other? Is this a consequence of their pride, their empire building and technological achievements?

B. D. Napier captures the spirit of the Tower-Builders in his poetic commentary on this biblical story. Here is Napier's paraphrase:

*And let us make a tower for ourselves, its head above all heights. And we  
will scale the dizzying heights  
ourselves, for us.. for us...*

*This Brick, this mighty fortress, is our God,  
A bulwark never, never failing;  
Our shelter from the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing.*

*Ah blessed Brick that builds the steadfast city.  
Ah wondrous tower, head in heaven.  
On these we proudly stamp  
Our name- produced by man.  
(Napier, **Come, Sweet Death**, p. 68-69)*

The Genesis account goes on to imagine God as a sort of heavenly inspector who comes down to view the tower. Again, let me read from Napier's paraphrase: (p. 72, 73)

*All silently and uninvoked God comes  
to view the vast, pretentious city  
and monumental tower  
in praise of man  
the highest.*

*He hears one calling to another, saying,*

*"Be not afraid; we have good news of joy,  
great joy, to all of us. For unto us  
is born this day a city and a tower.  
The government shall be within the city  
And we will make ourselves a name for us-  
Wonderful counselor, Almighty god  
And everlasting Father, prince of peace!  
And this shall be a sign for us-the tower,  
The monumental tower touching heaven."*

This tower construction, this empire-building, had become a self-serving project of self-importance. It caused confusion of priorities, loss of spiritual insight, unconcern for the moral implications of how power and wealth and technology should be used.

And so, in an effort to save women and men from themselves, God steps in and offers an appropriate divine response. Since they have abused the privilege of universal language by twisting meanings and confusing priorities for their own self-advancement, God further confuses their language. The people find that they can no longer communicate in a common tongue. The tower crumbles, and the people scatter.

This is a cautionary tale that certainly has contemporary implications for us as citizens in a modern world. What tower and empire building goes on at national and international levels, today? Where is desire for corporate wealth and technological advancement causing an erosion of spirit and a failure of communication?

But there is more to the story of the Tower of Babel, another layer of interpretation, perhaps best described by the theologian Walter Brueggemann. He says there is an inherent tension in the Tower story. It stresses both unity and scattering. Generally, we tend to think of unity as the desired goal, and dispersion or scattering as the punishment that happens because of human sin. But, unity can also have negative qualities, and scattering is sometimes the real goal, the way God intends for life to spread into all corners of the earth after creation.

In the Babel story, unity is not necessarily what God desires. The people want to preserve an artificial togetherness, a cultural same-ness, and they resist God's intent that they be scattered and spread over all the earth. (Brueggemann, *"Genesis" Interpretation*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, p.98-99) The people fear scattering and want to stay in their own safe city of uniformity. They are resisting God's design for the world, a Creation which unfolds and blossoms into thousands of forms.

God intends to create a world where there is difference, and names that diversity good. Therefore, the world is diminished when there are extinctions of any kind: species, languages, or cultures. Today's world is one which moves at a breakneck pace toward uniformity, where technology brings all of humankind into the tower of consumer culture, entertained by the universal media.

It is true that every people or tribe tends to be ethnocentric. We see the world from the towers of our own religion or race, our own ideology and nationality. This has been true as long as there have been civilizations. For instance, the word "barbarian" is derived from the Greek *barbarus*, meaning "one who babbles". In the ancient world it was applied to anyone who could not speak the language of the Greeks.

The tragedy of the story of the Tower of Babel is not that the earth's people were forced to spread out over the world with differing languages which birthed new cultures. The sadness is that human pride refused, and continues to refuse, to listen to the wisdom of those other people and cultures. This results in loss of trust and a failure to communicate. To those on the tower, the rest of the world always babbles.

Today is Pentecost. The story in the book of Acts of the coming of God's spirit to those left behind after Jesus' death can be seen as a bookend for the Tower story in Genesis. Today, we remember the tongues of flame that danced over the heads of the disciples, filling the empty places inside of them, giving them the ability to speak, not in unknown tongues, but in the real languages of the people who had gathered in Jerusalem. The scripture reads, "In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, 'These people who are talking like this are Galileans! How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages?'" (Acts 2:8)

Pentecost is the symbol of fresh hope for a new language community, one that affirms diversity and honors those who are different. In Acts, people of differing nationalities and languages heard a liberating word in their own tongue. Their differences were not erased, but rather celebrated. They would all return to their respective homes eventually, but they left Jerusalem a united, yet scattered church, inspired and empowered to do the work of love.

To do the work of love, to learn each others' "languages," this is not easy. Feelings will inevitably get hurt. Miscommunication will probably cause misunderstandings.

In one of the old "Cathy" comic strips, Cathy's father meets her at the airport after Irving fails to show up. "Are you sure Irving was supposed to pick you up, Cathy?" he asks her.

"Who knows?" she answers. "Once I waited down here for half an hour while he was waiting on the upper level. Once he went in to meet me at the gate and it took us half an hour to find each other. Once he waited for 45 minutes at the wrong airline. Once I got the dates mixed up and he spent two hours paging me while I was in a different city. We never run out of ways to miss each other."

Sometimes, it seems that way for us, too. We never run out of ways to miss each other. We misunderstand. We don't listen. As Cool Hand Luke said so plainly in the movie, there are so many times when "what we have here, is a failure to communicate"!

But that is where the work of love comes in. We should also never run out of ways to learn someone else's language, see from their eyes, or find common ground for spiritual kinship.

The legacies of both Babel and Pentecost are woven tightly together throughout human history and into our own lives and times. I wonder about our own national Towers, our own tendencies as a country to confuse self-examination with disloyalty, or to confuse dissent with a lack of patriotism. I think about the ongoing pain that occurs each Memorial Day when there is no common language between those who wish to honor fallen American servicemen and women by ending the wars that claim their lives, and those who feel that protest during war time dishonors those who serve. We never run out of ways to miss each other.

Today, I also grieve the oil spill tragedy, a slow-motion disaster which will affect untold numbers of marine creatures, as well as the humans who make their living from the sea. Language fails in the face of such a catastrophe. Words become babble, and only strong action to stop the calamity from getting worse is appropriate. However, tower mentalities prevail, the blame game has

shifted into high gear, and oil continues to gush. What language is needed to help us listen to each other and accept responsibility?

Much in the world seems sad and conflicted, and yet, God's spirit continues to flame in and out of our lives. We are given fresh chances to learn the tongue of one who is different, new opportunities to speak a common language of the heart.

May we use those gifts wisely. The world does not need more builders of towers, but rather students of many languages, those willing to be scattered, those willing to listen. May we breathe in the spirit which blows through our lives. May we breathe out words of peace. Amen.