

It Was a Warm Day in...

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

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It was a warm day in Babylon,
or *Babel* as it is known by the Jews.
The breeze blew in from the desert
and became sultry
as it crossed the Euphrates River.
Babylon was a magnificent city
rising there from the badlands
of what we now know as Iraq...
a city second cousin thrice removed of Baghdad,
a nearby municipality of similar interest and intrigue.
Babylon is now a heap of rubble
but its ruins are so old
they've been quite unable to discover its earliest date.¹
No matter,
while its poetry grew out of its history and geography,
neither its geography nor its history
is as important to us as its poetry:

*By the waters of Babylon
there we sat down and wept...
on the willows there
we hung up our lyres.... (Psalm 137:1-2)*

*Hark! a cry from Babylon!
The noise of great destruction...
For the Lord is laying Babylon waste,
and stilling her mighty voice. (Jeremiah 51:54a & 55a)*

James Weldon Johnson,
the black preacher/poet called it
*that hell-border city, Babylon.*²

As I was saying,
it was a certain warm day in Babylon.
By midmorning
the breeze that blew in from the desert
became sultry as it crossed the river
to blow rubbish about the cobble streets of Babylon
before the wind was lost in the body heat
of ten thousand squawking Babylonians

intent on the day's wheeling and dealing.
By midday
the breeze was gone
and the sun sent ten thousand sticky Babylonians
to find a shady place for an afternoon nap.

Later that day
as the sun eased
and the Babylonians began to stir again,

the Lord God Almighty came sauntering into town.

God crossed the moat
and jostled the sleepy crowd by the Ishtar Gate.
Unnoticed,
God passed through the city from north to south
down Processional Street
before doubling back to turn left on Adad
to cross the city's only bridge over the Euphrates...
the bridge,
by the way,
from which the boards were removed every night
to prevent the two halves of the city
stealing each other blind.³
Babylonians were not lovely people.

Nevertheless,
when God surveyed the city
God found the Babylonians strangely...

united.

It was a sinister union:

Like ducks on a pond
united against the ugly duckling;
Like children on the playground
united against a new kid in the class;
Like neighbors in the suburbs
united against a home for the mentally ill.

Being held in such a union
they had but one language
and it with a very few words.

Words like:

“Ninny, ninny, boo, boo.”

Oh, without a doubt,
on his trek through the city streets
God found the Babylonians to be of one mind
but it was a dangerous mind.

They were one:

One like a corporation united for nothing
except to make a profit;
One like a nation united for nothing
except its own economy.
One like a church united for nothing
except to serve itself.

Being of one mind like that
they needed but one language
and it with few words.

Words like these:

“Just give me the bottom line.”

And not for groups alone.
God looked at the people of Babylon
and saw they were not schizoid.
They were altogether together.

They were held together:

As an addict who is held together by nothing save addiction;
As a bag lady who is held together by nothing save need;
As a miser is held together by nothing save greed.

Being together like that
they required only one language and it with a few words.
Words like:

“It is mine.”

In the words of one commentator,
they were a fearful humanity
*organized against the purposes of God.*⁴

Such a dreadful league could not be tolerated.

So when God saw
the sin-soaked city of Babylon,
according to the story,
God confused their language
and scattered the people
to the four corners of the earth.
They were no longer
one people
of one mind
held together
in their acts of crime.
They became many people
with many tongues
and many words.

And in our tradition
that's the story
of why there are so many words
in so many languages.

I read the other day where
the new Oxford English Dictionary
requires a three-foot pile of very thin paper
and extremely fine print
to define the words in our language alone.⁵

We must add to that, of course,
German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Russian, Greek,
and all the rest
plus all their dialects.

Understanding truth nowadays
with so many words in so many languages
can be quite a riddle.

It was a warm day in Jerusalem.
The wind that blew in from the desert
was parched and dry
causing dust to settle on eyebrows and eyelashes
and crust at the children's nostrils.

Jerusalem is a city
whose history is more important to us than its poetry
but its poetry is beautiful to us all the same:

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent;
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication goes forth as brightness.
(Isaiah 62:1a)*

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets
and stoning those who are sent to you!
How often would I have gathered your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you would not. (Luke 13:34)*

How does the modern anthem go?
*Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
lift up your gates and sing
Hosanna in the highest.
Hosanna to your king.*

As I was saying,
it was a certain warm day in Jerusalem.
A holiday.
Pentecost, to be exact.
It was many, many, many years after
that certain warm day in Babylon.

Remember how
a thousand years in the sight of God
are but as yesterday when it is passed?
That's the way it was.

By midmorning
the breeze that blew in from the desert
had parched every lip in town
and sent tourists and local hucksters alike
to the wells
to vie with camels, sheep, and goats
for what muddy water was there.

On holiday days
strangers came from everywhere:
Galileans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites;
Residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia;
Egypt, Libya, Pamphylia and all the rest.

It was the scattered languages of Babylon
full-blown and
come home to roost.

Ten thousand visitors squawking
a million words
in a hundred languages and dialects
all intent on doing the holiday right.

By midday
the breeze was gone

and the sun sent ten thousand babbling tourists
to find a shady place to rest.

Later that day
as the sun eased
and the tourists began to stir again,

the Lord God Almighty came strolling into town.

God entered by the Damascus Gate
and made way to the temple
to watch the religious gyrations put on for the holiday.

Soon boring of that,
like going from the cathedral to Macy's at Christmas,
God ambled through the streets
to see the real holiday gyrations
of the real visitors to Jerusalem.

What God heard was more important
than what God saw:

What God heard was like Arabs and Jews
trying to discuss the Holy Land;
It was like Catholics and Protestants
trying to discuss the future of Northern Ireland;
It was like blacks and whites
trying to discuss the politics of South Africa;
It was like the president and congress
trying to discuss health care.
It was like Democrats and Republicans
trying to discuss the national debt;
It was like the school board
trying to discuss the annual budget.

There were too many words...
words no one cared to hear
and no one wished to understand.

God walked through the streets of Jerusalem
to see what God could see
or hear what God could hear more like:

It was like children
trying to divide candy;
It was like couples
trying to discuss money;
It was like parents

trying to discuss sex and curfews with teens;
It was like divorcees
trying to discuss the children and the grandfather clock;
It was like bureaucrats
trying to explain their forms.

There were too many words...
words no one cared to hear
and no one wished to understand.

Did it make God angry
or did it make God sad
to stroll the streets of Jerusalem?

I think sad.
Some say mad.
No matter.
The Lord God Almighty left Jerusalem,
slump shouldered,
through the Damascus Gate.
But God wasn't long gone.

As it happened the disciples of Jesus
were together that day...
together in one spot...
grieving his loss perhaps
and probably
reflecting on what Jesus had taught them to think
and do
and be.

And as they reflected on one Jesus of Nazareth,

*Suddenly there came
a sound from heaven
like the rush of a mighty wind
and it filled the house
with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.*

God wasn't long gone.
To Jerusalem,

*God gave the Spirit of
Love and Joy and Peace...
the Spirit of
Touch and Forgiveness and Gentleness...
at Jerusalem God gave the Spirit of*

T r u t h.

And they all heard it.
They all heard the truth of God
in his own language or
in her own language.

*With the Spirit of Jesus blowing among them
all the people came together*

and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ
they were able to hear each other...
and to understand each other
and to love each other.

It was Babylon gone full cycle.
It was confused language redeemed and made whole.
It was scattered people reunited.

They called it the birth of the church.

Though the church has not always
lived up to the reputation of its noble birth
when,
in the Spirit of Jesus Christ,
the people are able to listen to each other
and hear each other
and love each other

it is church.

Remember how a thousand years
in the sight of God
are but as yesterday
when it is past.
Keep that in mind.

It was a warm day in Memphis, Tennessee.
The wind that blew across the Mississippi River was damp but pleasing.
By midmorning the rush hour traffic was over.
At midday everyone broke for lunch.

Just as they began to stir after lunch

the Lord God Almighty came moseying down Union Avenue

to see what God could see.

What God heard is far more important than what God saw.
What God heard was like....

Let us pray.

Lord God,

fill us with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we pray,
that our ears will be open to hear of his way and
that our words and our lives will be full of his truth.

Then make of us the church.

We pray in his name. Amen.

NOTES

¹ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 334f.

² James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking, 1927), 25.

³ *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 335.

⁴ Those familiar with Walter Brueggemann's commentary on Genesis (*Interpretation*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) will recognize his work in much of this sermon both in its Genesis and Acts sections. As usual I am grateful for Professor Brueggemann's insight and sensitivity. The quote is to be found on page 100.

⁵ Craig R. Dykstra, "After the Noise," *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost, 1990): 26.