

***Let God Be God!***

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

In the beginning, *God....* In the end, *God....* This is the arc of Scripture. It is the story of each human life. It is also the story of the whole world, whether or not the world knows it. "In him we live, and move, and have our being," Paul declared to Greeks who did not know the God of Israel. (Acts 17:28)

It is in the church that God's story for the whole of humanity is made explicit. It is for the sake of the whole world, and it is in anticipation of the whole world acknowledging God's rule, that the church lives as a witness to the reign of God.

In the words of the sixth "Great End," the church is called to be an "exhibition of the kingdom of God" to the world. (*Book of Order* F-1.0304) The church is, among other things, the human society that demonstrates visibly God's desire for the ordering of relationships between people, between humanity and the rest of creation, and between the world and its Creator. So, how are we doing with that?

The Biblical story of humanity begins with Adam and Eve defying God's order by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They cannot resist the temptation to know everything that God knows. God replies, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." (Genesis 3:22) Our craving for omniscience and for immortality alike demonstrate our resistance to a core message of Scripture: God is God, and we are not.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis set the stage for the rest of Scripture. In these chapters we find stories that tell of the formation of the world in which we find ourselves – the world of nature, as well as the world of humanity. There we learn the essence of sin, mortality, judgment, and salvation through the telling of cosmic stories that transcend the particular horizons in which God's chosen people live from Genesis 12 onward. The story of Adam and Eve describes the original sin of disobedience and thirst to be like God that inhabits each human being. The section closes with the story of Babel and its aftermath. Like the story of Eden, Babel tells us something about original sin, but this time the setting is a city, not a garden; it explains the disorder of human society, not just the personal sinfulness that we each bear as children of Adam and Eve.

God comes on the scene in Genesis 11 with words of alarm that echo God's words upon discovering Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge: "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." (Genesis 11:6) If Genesis 3 is about our craving for knowledge that belongs only to God, Genesis 11 discloses our lust for power that belongs only to God. With Adam and Eve, we desire the *omniscience* that renders God superfluous; with Babel, we desire the *omnipotence* that renders God superfluous. One story discloses the essence of human sin personally, the other, corporately.

The Gospels and the book of Acts tell of how God has broken into human history to heal our sinfulness. By sending Jesus to be our crucified and risen Savior, God acted to release us from the curse of Adam; by sending the Holy Spirit to the company of Jesus' followers at Pentecost, God acted to release us from the curse of Babel. Through Jesus, human separation

from God is healed; through the outpoured Holy Spirit, human separation from one another is healed.

On the surface, the connection of Babel to Pentecost is obvious – both are stories of God leading people of a single language to speak multiple languages. But the connection is more a matter of contrasts than of similarities.

- Both tell of people being gathered with a single purpose – but at Babel, the gathering was about consolidating human power, while at Pentecost the gathering was about waiting on God to reveal God’s power.
- At Babel, the focus was all on what *we* can do to shape our world; at Pentecost, we look for what *God* will do to transform our world.
- Babel tells of the apex of *human* exploits; Pentecost is *God’s* project as the Holy Spirit comes with manifestations that no human being could make up.
- Babel’s efforts result in the *scattering* of people who had been united around their like-mindedness; Pentecost is the *ingathering* of people of every race and nation, young and old, men and women, slave and free, whose differences are honored rather than obliterated.

Though we know we have been justified freely by the grace of God given us through the life, death, and resurrection Jesus, we constantly struggle against the temptation to think that our works have something to do with our salvation. We forget all too easily that salvation is all gift, and begin to confuse our justification with our sanctification, as though we are saved because we are holy. We begin almost immediately to add to the free gift of God other expectations. This is a tendency that Paul fights constantly in his many letters. Whatever we add to the Gospel – circumcision, keeping of special days, restrictions about what we eat or with whom we eat, and so on – betrays the Gospel. Such teaching is “another Gospel” entirely, Paul contends in Galatians 1. God has already given us everything we need for salvation in Jesus Christ, and to add anything to it is to refuse to let God be God.

Something similar happens with Pentecost. God pours out the Spirit on the waiting disciples, giving them languages to tell the Good News to all peoples, confirming their message with miraculous signs that humans could never have made up themselves. We learn at Pentecost that our life together as the Christian church is made possible only by the Spirit’s presence among us. Here we are reminded that *all* who call on the Lord’s name will be saved. Yet all too easily we begin trying to control who is in the church and who is not, rather than receiving the church as utterly a divine gift. We create standards and orders that are well-intended, but have the effect of enabling us continue being church apart from God. The honest truth is that we have so completely figured out how to “do church” that we could keep our church going for a long time without any intervention by the Holy Spirit. We have shaped the life and work of the church by our own lights and preferences.

The church of Pentecost is a church utterly dependent on God’s Spirit for its identity and its mission. It is always open to receiving something new from the Lord, ready to go in unprecedented directions as the Lord leads. It is content to wait on the Lord until the Spirit moves. It resists the anxiety that all too easily prompts us to move when the Spirit has not yet moved us.

How do we know the difference between the movement of God's Spirit and our own efforts to move ourselves? How can we be sure that we are not trying to play God ourselves, making the church we want rather than receiving the church God wants to birth?

Here is a fundamental test of whether God is at work, or it's really us in charge – if God is in fact at work, there will be surprises and disruptions. God's way is not simply our way writ large. Paul teaches that while God doesn't create confusion or anarchy, in our commitment to doing things "decently and in order" we need to remain open to whatever God is bringing our way. His counsel of decency and order in the church is preceded by this: "Let all things be done!" (1 Corinthians 14:32, 40)

Little is more heartwarming to good Presbyterians than Paul's injunction, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Yet the most memorable sermon I ever heard on this verse focused on the first five words of the verse, which we ignore to our peril.

Give permission for something new, for goodness' sake! Who knows but what God might be stirring things up in ways as unimaginable as the wind, fire, and foreign tongues were on the Day of Pentecost! Maybe God has a surprise in store for us that is as unsettling to us as Peter found God's command to rise, kill, and eat a host of unclean animals. (Acts 10)

"Let it be done!" – so Mary responds to the unprecedented news of her impending motherhood, delivered to her by Gabriel. "Let it be done!" – so the church of Pentecost responds to the new things God is doing in its midst. "Let God be God!"

Are we a Babel church or a Pentecost church? Are we trying to exercise power and control over our fellowship that rightly belong only to God? Are we ready for the Spirit of Pentecost to lead us wherever God pleases, even if the journey takes us on pathways we might never have imagined?

In the end, God will be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:28) Our efforts to claim for ourselves that which belongs only to God will be no more successful than Adam and Eve's attempts to achieve omniscience, or Babel's determination to achieve omnipotence. Pentecost testifies that when our way forward is blocked, God's own way will prevail in due time. This is why I am not discouraged by statistics that reveal church decline. God is not done with us. The Holy Spirit is ready to create something new in us and through us when, like the disciples at Pentecost, we wait on the Lord together. The Spirit poured out at Pentecost will likewise impel us outward, to tell the world in word and deed the wonders of God's redeeming love. This is God's church, after all. It does not belong to us.

Let God be God – in us, among us, and through us!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.