

Whitsunday

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:23-31

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It was several generations after the flood that the people, who all spoke with one voice, decided to make a name for themselves. On the plains of Shinar, they began to build a great city—a tower reaching into the heavens at its center. Concerned at what was happening, YHWH came down to see what the children of man were building.

Now, it has to be an eerily ominous thing when God descends to see what is going on. In the Garden, God was taking His walk in the cool of the day, and asks where Adam was. As if He didn't know, He asks as if to give the man a chance to reveal and explain himself. Things take a turn for the worse from there. Adam blames the woman; the woman blames the serpent—all three received a curse; to mankind, it is the promised curse of death, which, having now fallen into sin, is something of a blessing: man does not have to live forever under the sting of sin. (cf. Genesis 3:8-19)

In today's Old Testament reading, God did not have to come down to see what the children of man had built. But His condescending that day resulted in punishment for sin. The people on the plains of Shinar thought too highly of themselves. It's the same sin of Adam and the woman, who thought that they could be like God—maybe better than God—simply by eating the fruit that He had commanded them not to eat. These people thought themselves God's equal or superior by the might of their hands and handiwork. "[N]othing that they propose to do will be withheld from them."

Once again, God's condescending results in the condemnation and punishment of sin. The people were scattered from Shinar. Their language was confused. One day, neighbors could speak to each other; the next, there was confusion, and neighbors were separated, perhaps they even became enemies. From there, God dispersed the people over the face of the earth.

The people did get a name that day, though not for themselves. They did earn it along with their punishment. Because their language was confused, the place was called Babel. It comes from a contraction of the Hebrew word *balel*, which means "confuse." But, it is also used to describe the gibberish one speaks or the use of an incomprehensible language. When one babbles on, you are unable to understand them because they are speaking incomprehensibly or a language that you are not familiar with. We call it babble in English, *brabbeln* in German, *barbaridzo* in Greek, from which the word barbarian is derived. Through the ages, and even in the different confused languages, what happened in Shinar has become associated with speaking gibberish.

So, when God comes down from heaven, it is often to condemn and punish sin. But He also does it as the remedy for sin.

As God cursed Adam and the woman, He also promised that the woman's seed would come and crush the serpent's head. Man had fallen into sin and death and would be subject to the will and influence of the serpent, the great Deceiver, Satan. But the promised seed would come, not of any man, born not of the will of any man, but of God. The seed of the woman, the seed of Mary, is Jesus. He is God with us. This is God's condescending in the flesh of man, and He's come not to punish man for the sin, but to receive the punishment for His fellow man.

The punishment Jesus would receive is death. "In the day you eat of it," the Father told Adam, "you shall surely die." Adam did die. So did Eve. As did their descendants from the plains of Shinar. So did the woman's seed. On a cross outside of Jerusalem, the Son of God was nailed as a common criminal. There, He gave His life, the Life of God, as a ransom for many, shedding His blood for the remission of your sins, and the sins of the people of Shinar, and the sins of Adam and Eve. All of these, the sins of all mankind, He has removed from them, and died with them. Sins no longer belong to those who have committed them—they are no longer yours—they belong to Jesus, who paid the price in full for every last one of them. The curse of sin has been reversed.

That is also what has happened in Jerusalem 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Jesus' now ascended, sends the Holy Spirit to His disciples, who alights them all as tongues of fire over their heads. God condescends again, and once again, it is as remedy to curse and punishment. There in Jerusalem, the good news of Christ crucified is proclaimed to people gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world as they are observing the Feast of Booths. These all, barbarians by all rights to the Jews and Romans, heard this proclamation in their own languages. At Babel, God confused the language of the children of man; in Jerusalem, God brings the one message of salvation in every language—once, tongues were confused, but by the tongues of flame that are the Holy Spirit, the Church was united in Christ crucified; a reversal, of sorts, of the curse of Babel.

That same proclamation happens to this day, and still in the various languages around the world. No matter the language, the Word is the same: Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins.

It is reasonable to believe that those gathered in Jerusalem who heard the proclamation on Pentecost shared the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ with those back in their home country and in their own language. Luke states plainly that the population of the church explodes that Pentecost day nearly 30 times! The believers continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, were even together and had all things in common (Acts 2:41-45), but it is reasonable to think that this togetherness and commonness did not mean that they all stayed in Jerusalem for the rest of their lives. And, as they returned to their homes, you can be certain that the Holy Spirit accompanied them, as it does you who have been baptized. Though scattered throughout the world, like the people from Shinar, the Church is nevertheless one in Christ Jesus, kept that way by the work of the Holy Spirit.

And the apostles went from Jerusalem into all the known world. Wherever they went, they proclaimed the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. And the Holy Spirit was at work then in the speaking and hearing of those words to bring many to faith. Congregations were established in many of the places where the apostles went, some perhaps in places where the hearers of Pentecost day lived.

Through the ages, the Word of God spread from place to place, making its way even here. And where the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins is made, there the Holy Spirit is at work to bring people to faith and repentance, giving them the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross. The Spirit takes from what is of Jesus and gives it, even to you, dear hearers. For right now, God is at work, condescending to you, and giving Himself to you in Word and Sacrament to remedy the illness with which you struggle—your sins and sinfulness.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name,  
He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things  
that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as  
the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither  
let it be afraid.

God's condescending is often to bring curse and punishment for sin. But He does not forget those who are cursed, punished, and afflicted. He comes also remedy the curse, to receive the full punishment, and to bring peace to the afflicted.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit—to bring you to Jesus and Jesus to you. In so doing, He reminds you of what Jesus has said. The Spirit works through the Word to bring you to peace with God; a peace which the world cannot give, but comes only to you through death and resurrection: your death to sin in the death of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and your rising again to newness of life from the waters of Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit has come to you and given you faith to receive the benefits of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, remedying the curse of sin and death with which you suffer, preparing you for His coming on the last day to raise you and all the dead, and give you eternal life to you and to all believers in Christ, from every tribe, nation, and language. This is His promise to you, made from the mouth of Jesus Christ, and carried to you ear by the Holy Spirit, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.