

PENTECOST – May 23, 2010

Genesis 11:1-9

Pastor Thomas Kneser

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

One of the hot-button issues in our country now is how to handle illegal immigrants. The state of Arizona has passed legislation stating that the police have the right to question people about their status as citizens, that they must have some kind of paperwork verifying that they are in the country legally. I don't have a problem with that. To me it's no different from when I go fishing, that I had better have my license along, in case the DNR wardens are checking. Same is true with our driver's licenses. If I don't have them, I am acting illegally. Those things aren't an infringement on my rights. The state wants things to be done legally and in an orderly way.

One of the causes of all the chaos is the unrest in Mexico. There's been a veritable explosion of violence by all the drug trafficking. It has gotten so bad that our synod is having to recall the missionaries that we have down there. It's no wonder that thousands of Mexicans are fleeing to our country. There's a lot of confusion, rhetoric from politicians, demonstrations for and against the stance that the state of Arizona has taken. I certainly don't have the answers to solve the situation, as complicated and chaotic as it is. Whether individual states, or the federal government or the president is able to tackle it and bring it to a suitable conclusion, only time will tell. But for now it's a real mess.

In the words before us today from our OT lesson we see another scene of chaos and confusion. This one, however, was brought on by God himself because of the actions of sinful human beings. He made a dramatic demonstration of his power to counter-act the sinful arrogance of mankind. And, as we are observing again on this Pentecost Sunday, God made another dramatic demonstration of his power to deal with the sinfulness of mankind. Thus, let's focus on this idea, that...

### **PENTECOST BREAKS THROUGH THE BABBLE FROM BABEL**

It deals with the confusion caused by sin. It brings unity worked by the Spirit.

#### I.

The setting for this account is that it is about 5 or 6 generations after the great flood, perhaps 150-175 years after that cataclysmic event. And, as Moses tells us here, **The whole world had one language and a common speech.** There was still that sense of a single community and union. When Noah and his family had left the ark, God had given them the same command he had given to Adam and Eve, **Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth.** God wanted his world repopulated. That was his will for mankind.

But here we see that the people of that day were very much the same as the people who had died in the Flood. They openly disobey God's clear command. They show their arrogance and defiance. They decided to build a city and a tower. They used building materials that would really last, baked bricks instead of sun-dried ones, tar for mortar instead of mud. They wanted this city and tower to last. And the reason was a deliberate choice to defy God's will. He wouldn't be able to destroy their city. They were too smart for him. Their tower was going to reach all the way to heaven, almost like shaking their fist at God and saying that they were going to show him. They were going to make a name for themselves. "We're something special all by ourselves. We don't need God to take care of us and boss us around!" they seemed to be saying. They weren't going to be scattered over the face of the earth as God had decreed. They were going to stay right here, where they wanted, around their tower. And if God tried to do anything about it, they could always find their way back. That tower was going to be a monument to their ingenuity, their ability. They were masters of their own destiny, captains of their own fate.

Now, you would think that these people would have known better. Noah was still alive. The great Flood should have been still etched in their memories. And yet we see how far sin can drag human beings down, away from God. These people were falling prey to the same lie Satan had used on Adam

and Eve, **You will be like God.** Here it was the allure of building that tower, of showing God that they were people to be reckoned with all by themselves, that they didn't need him anymore, that they were pretty much gods all by themselves.

And that lie of Satan is still very much in evidence today, isn't it? We call it secular humanism and it's all around us. Look at the attitude we see in people when it comes to right and wrong. Everyone seems to think they can decide for themselves. If I want to do something, if it appeals to me, if it will make me feel good and help me deal with my problems, even if only for a few moments, then I'm going to do it, no matter who gets hurt, no matter what the consequences, no matter if God and his Word tells me it's wrong. If I want to have sex with someone before getting married to that person, if I want to some of those items in the store, if I think I can make more money by cutting corners in my business, then God's will and God's word be damned. No God is going to tell me what to do. Who cares about his commandments? His guidelines for holy living, Jesus' desire that his disciples show love for God above all else, his call to deny ourselves and follow him, all that goes out the window. There is an open defiance of authority in our society. Each person thinks they can do what is right in their own eyes. People may say that they believe in God. But if they do not do what he says, than their confession is meaningless. They are pushing God off his throne and putting themselves up there in his place. Secular humanism is the ultimate sin when it comes to arrogance, pride and idolatry. The creature thinks he's better than his creator.

We see here God's answer to such folly. He knows how powerful a deception sin is, the blatant actions it leads us into. Here, these people were ready to do anything, that their arrogance had totally blinded them to the possible consequences. God saw that they needed to be put in their place, reminded of how he is really in control of things. After the great Flood he had promised never again to destroy the world with water. So here he takes a different course. He was going to stop this building activity in its tracks.

**Let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.** Man's sin brings about God's judgment in the form of the confusion of languages. God throws up a barrier to communication. All of a sudden, by the miraculous power of God, the people are speaking different languages. No one can understand his neighbor. The planners cannot communicate with the workers on how the building should progress. No longer are they able to present a united challenge against God and his commands. There is only the babble of Babel, which would obviously lead to suspicion, strife, tension and hostility. They were forced to stop building the tower and the city. Instead of frustrating God's plan of filling the earth, now they were being compelled to carry it out. Because of the babble and confusion caused by the different languages, groups of people who did speak the same were now heading off in their own direction, looking for their own place to settle down, away from everyone else. They were being scattered, just as God had originally intended. Sin had caused the confusion and God had used his punishment to cause his will to be carried out.

## II.

Now we jump ahead some 2500 years. It's the day of Pentecost. For the Jews this was a festival similar to our Thanksgiving Day. Pentecost marked the beginning of the barley harvest. It was a day when many of the Jews came to the Temple to offer God the firstfruits of the harvest as a demonstration of thanks to him for his goodness.

But the Holy Spirit has new plans for this special day. It is to mark the beginning of the Christian Church. There were the outward signs of something special. The sound of a violent wind filled the room where the disciples and the other believers were gathered. It filled the whole city, causing people to gather near the Temple. There were the tongues of fire that appeared on the heads of the disciples. And then there was the miracle that links Pentecost with the tower of Babel. The disciples began to speak in other tongues, languages they had never learned, probably never even heard before.

As the disciples moved among the crowd which had gathered, they were able to communicate the good news about Jesus in their own native language. While they were all Jews when it came to their religion, many of them had come from nations and lands throughout the Mediterranean region. You

heard the list of the different peoples who were hearing the disciples tell them about Jesus. The events of the tower of Babel were being overcome through a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost breaks through the babble of Babel. Instead of confusion, there was now a united effort to proclaim the good news about Jesus. The gospel was going to have an immediate impact. The church was going to start off with a bang.

Oh, there were still the skeptics, the doubters, the critics. **They have had too much wine**, some said. Man's natural, sinful reaction came out even in the face of a most astonishing miracle. When God acts, even in the most miraculous of ways, there is still defiance and rejection.

But what a miracle it was! Peter used the occasion to address the crowd which had gathered. He showed how this miracle of languages had been foretold by the prophet Joel. Then, most importantly, he spoke to them about Jesus. He reminded them of the events of Jesus' life, the miracles he performed, the words he spoke. Peter also reminded them that they were the ones who handed Jesus over to be crucified, that they were the ones who had put him to death. But then he proclaimed to everyone how God had raised this Jesus from the dead and how these disciples were all witnesses of this fact. He concluded his sermon by saying, **God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.**

The results of Peter's sermon and of the disciples speaking to the crowds in their own native languages were read to you. The people were cut to the heart, sorry for their sins. No arrogance or fist shaking toward God. Peter then invited them to repent and be baptized, to believe in Jesus as their Savior. And the Spirit blessed that preaching of the gospel – 3000 were brought to faith. And they showed their unity, the end of Acts 2 says, by their devotion to the word and sacraments, to the fellowship and to prayer. In short, they were united by the Holy Spirit in a Christian community, what we call the Holy Christian Church. They were one in their faith, in their love, in their devotion to God and his will. The events of Babel were reversed. Pentecost breaks through the babble of Babel and people were brought into union with their Lord and Savior.

Those, my friends, are the wonders of God's grace. That message of Pentecost has been proclaimed to you. Since December we have again relived the great events in the life of our Savior. We have rejoiced with the angels over Bethlehem. We have followed him to the cross where he poured out his blood, giving his life to take away the punishment that should have been ours because of our arrogance and defiance against God and his will. We have walked with the women to find the tomb empty. We have heard the words of the risen Savior to stop doubting and believe. We have seen him go into heaven as his ascension. Our God has spoken to us from the pages of Scripture. We have heard the good news that God has made this Jesus both Lord and Christ. He is our Savior.

And we have heard it in our own language. We didn't have to learn Hebrew or Greek to read about God's love and mercy to us. It was proclaimed to us in a language we understand. The Holy Spirit had driven out of our hearts the confusion caused by sin, the arrogance and pride. Obviously, we dare never become complacent when it comes to sin. But the effects of Babel have been reversed. God has brought us together. We have been united with our fellow believers in the Christian Church. The confusion is gone. We are one with believers throughout the world, no matter what their nationality, no matter what language they speak.

And one day we will join with them all, with all believers who have ever lived, in a chorus of praise and thanksgiving to his loving, saving God of ours. We will gather around the throne of the Lamb in heaven to offer him an eternity of worship and devotion. There the confusion caused by sin will disappear. We will be part of the heavenly communion of saints, brought together by the power of the Holy Spirit who works faith in our hearts, faith in Jesus as our Savior. That's why we send missionaries into places like Zambia and Malawi in Africa, Brazil and Colombia in South America, Hong Kong, Japan and India, and many other places. The Holy Spirit overcomes the language barriers with the gospel message that Jesus is the Savior of the world. And when people believe that message, as Pentecost breaks through the babble of Babel, we are united in Christ. May that work always continue until he returns again. AMEN.