

“Understanding the Babble”

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:1-12)

Every year, when our liturgical cycle comes around again to the birth of the church in Acts 2, I am always struck by the sounds of Pentecost: the rush of violent gusts of wind that filled the house... the hissing and snapping of tongues of fire above each person’s head. But I have to think that the most mysterious, jarring, and memorable of all the sounds of Pentecost may have been the voices “*from every nation under heaven*” all speaking at once. Imagine how that sound must have filled the room -- the babble of every man, woman, and child rising up and blending into a cacophony of clashing inflections, intonations, cadences, and rhythms.

I’ve always wondered about that word “babble,” whether it was somehow derived from the story we just heard from Genesis about the Tower of Babel. It would make sense, since that ancient story speaks directly to the matter of human communication and spoken language. This strange snippet from primordial history serves as the Bible’s explanation of why we have so many languages... and why we have so much trouble understanding one another. It suggests that there was a time when did all speak the same language, when we all could understand each other much more clearly. But we seemed to be taking that gift in bad directions, so God made an intentional decision to mix it up – to muddle our language, so that, to use God’s words, “they will not understand one another’s speech.”¹ It seems a rational connection to make, that the ancient myth of the Tower of Babel is the root of the English word “babble,” which denotes speech that no one can understand.

Interestingly enough, there does not seem to be any linguistic connection to the Babel Tower story. The modern English word “babble,” which means to talk enthusiastically or excessively, or to utter meaningless or unintelligible sounds,² is rooted in German, French, and even Swedish and Icelandic words from the Middle Ages. Like those

¹ Genesis 11:6-7.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/babble#:~:text=Definition%20of%20babble,transitive%20verb>



older words, “babble” is an example of “onomatopoeia,” which means it is a word that is based on the sound it describes.³

There are two sounds, in particular, that “babble” recalls. The first is the sound that babies make when they are first learning to talk, specifically the “ba-ba-ba” sounds that come very early in their explorations with speech. At first, those sounds are unintelligible. They are just noises that have no real meaning. They are trying to point to something, there is some kind of thought and purpose behind the sound, but the point does not come across.

Getting back to the Tower of Babel and the house church of Pentecost, I would liken these baby sounds to the babble we hear all the time around us. There are so many words it is hard to make sense of them. And let’s face it, a lot of it is infantile. Some of the words are trying to point to something. Some of the words even have some thought and purpose behind them. But even the halfway coherent thoughts are easily drowned out, and it all just seems to disintegrate into a constant hum of “blah-blah-blah.” I think we all feel like that the barrage of the babble is almost unbearable. The decibel level is too high... the word count is too high... and we need someone or something to break through the noise so we can all hear clearly again.

But there is another linguistic use of “babble” that we can relate to in a much more positive way. There is another sound that the word emulates, and it may be coming to your mind right now. It is the sound of a moving stream, the soft gurgling flow of water over rocks and ledges. There is a reason that many people use sound machines at night to clear out the mental clutter of the day or drown out the jarring noise of the street outside, and that a great many of those sound machines bubble out the sounds of a babbling brook. While the blah-blah-blah of incoherent speech tends to increase our anxiety level, the soothing sound of gently descending water has a way of reducing it -- soothing our nerves, calming our spirits, and helping us rest.

Some of you may remember Robert Redford’s 1992 movie “A River Runs Through It.” It was based on the writings of Norman Maclean, the son of a Presbyterian preacher who raised his family on the banks of the Bitterroot and Blackfoot Rivers in Montana. The river is a constant in the film, to the point that it becomes more of a character than a setting. As the chaos of the world mixes the joy of the family with healthy doses of tragedy and pain, and as things get snagged and tangled like old fishing line, the stoic moving river seems to be the only constant. It just keeps flowing on, stately and unchanging.

Some of the most beautiful words of Maclean’s book make it into Redford’s movie verbatim and intact. As the film comes to a close, an elderly Norman is seen rhythmically casting a fly into the river as his voiceover captures the eternal reach of the moment.

“When I am alone in the half light of the canyon,” Norman says,

all existence seems to fade to a being with my soul and memories, and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River, and a four-count rhythm, and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.⁴

³ <http://www.wordwizard.com/phpbb3/viewtopic.php?t=6979>;

[https://www.etymonline.com/word/babble#:~:text=babble%20\(v.\),Old%20French%20abillier%2C%20etc.](https://www.etymonline.com/word/babble#:~:text=babble%20(v.),Old%20French%20abillier%2C%20etc.))

⁴ *A River Runs Through It*, directed by Robert Redford (Columbia Pictures, 1992).

Some of the words are ours as well, written on rocks from the basement of time. And they still speak through the babbling of the waters, if we can pause long enough, and be still long enough, and be open enough to hear them.

These are the sounds of Pentecost, and they reveal the power of Pentecost. At Pentecost, we see the power of God break through the din of tens, hundreds, even millions of people babbling all at once. Amidst the deafening, maddening “blah-blah-blah” of the world, Pentecost gives us hope that meaning and peace may still break through, because Pentecost power not only gave the church the ability to speak in many languages, it also gave the church the ability to hear in many languages, too. And not only to hear, but to understand. Pentecost power shows us that diversity is not a hindrance to God’s plan, but a foundational element of God’s plan. We were never intended to all be the same. Human distinctiveness and particularity are what makes humanity beautiful. The goal is not to be the same; the goal is to understand despite our differences, and Pentecost reminds us where – or more accurately, to whom – we should look for that understanding.

But Pentecost does much more than cut through the deafening babble of mortal voices. It also allows us to hear the voices that are not mortal – the eternal murmurings of God’s order, God’s purpose, God’s hope, and God’s love. It gives us ears to hear the whispers of truth and wisdom that are always flowing below us, above us and around us, eternal words written not only on river rocks, but on our hearts as well.

Pentecost reminds us that, eventually, all things merge into one, and a babbling brook runs through it.

Thanks be to God. *Amen.*