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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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Year C, Day of Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 11:1-9](#)

[Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)

[Acts 2:1-21](#)

[John 14:8-17, 25-27](#)

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Back in the 1930s, Josef Stalin had an idea. He would dynamite Moscow's main cathedral and replace it with the tallest building in the world: a Palace of Soviets, a kind of capitol building and cultural center rolled into one, topped with a 300-foot statue of Lenin. It would be the centerpiece of the new communist paradise, where all the nationalities and languages of the Soviet Union would come together—under the benevolent leadership of Russia, of course, but theoretically as equals, united under the workers' revolution.

It never happened: World War II intervened and the plan fizzled. But no wonder Stalin wanted to build that tower. He wanted to show that his nation, his project, his empire, was powerful and important. It's classic. To show how important you are, build something. The bigger the better. That's how you know you're important. That's how other people know you're important. It's a story at least as old as the Tower of Babel in Genesis.

There was a real Tower of Babel. It was the ziggurat, the stair-stepped tower at the heart of Babylon, the most powerful city of the ancient world. The Israelites who told this story didn't have much love for Babylon where they'd been held captive for two generations. They loved the pun of *Babylon* and *Babble*, which works in Hebrew about the way it does in English: God confuses the people's languages, so all they can do is *babble* at each other.

The Babylonians had a great empire, like so many before and since. They tried to bring the whole world together, which in some ways is noble, except of course it meant bringing the world together under the thumb of Babylon. That's the thing about a tower. It marks a center. And it always has a top. It's a good symbol for the way human beings tend to try to create unity, which is mostly by building empires. Empires talk about uniting many peoples—but in practice one group sits at the center. To quote George Orwell, everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others. A nobleman in Babylon is more equal than a peasant woman in conquered Judah. The closer to the center, the higher up the tower, the better.

Now the Babel story isn't just about Babylon. It's an origin story about all our human efforts to build towers, make a name for ourselves, and create unity based on sameness. The Roman Empire preached peace and prosperity through military might. The British Empire preached progress through genteel English civilization. The Soviet Union preached brotherhood through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

All those empires claimed to unite many peoples. But everyone knew the difference between a slave in Spain and Caesar in Rome, or a Punjabi villager and Queen Victoria, or a pensioner in Kazakhstan and a Kremlin bureaucrat with a big Moscow apartment.

In Genesis we see what happens to empires. They fragment. Sooner or later, the myth collapses and the center can't hold. What's left is division. We've seen it happen in the former Soviet Union as nations like Ukraine and Georgia and the Baltics pursue independence, while Russia tries to draw them back into the Greater Russian fold, now at the cost of brutal warfare and hundreds of thousands of lives.

And in human terms, that's the choice we have. A false unity based on empire, or unity with those like us speak our language, share our customs and our identity.

That's where Pentecost comes in.

Today is the day when God undid the curse of Babel. About two thousand years ago, on Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, Jesus' friends were together in one place, waiting for whatever would happen next. And then the Spirit moved among them. Tongues of fire appeared on each of them. "Tongues," another pun, because just as in English, "tongues" can also mean "languages."

Then the real miracle began. Parthians, Medes, Pamphylans and all the rest heard the good news in their native tongues. Not in the imperial languages they used to communicate with each other, but the languages they learned on their mothers' laps. Oh, a few heard it in Greek or Latin, like those visitors from Rome mentioned toward the end of that long list. But they're not first, not more important than anyone else.

What happens next is just as important. From this moment in Acts, the disciples begin to go out. They leave the house and get out there: as Luke puts it, “from Jerusalem, to the rest of Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

At Pentecost God creates a new kind of unity. One without a tower. No one place at the center. No one group at the top. As the psalm puts it, “the Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole earth.” There’s no center in Babylon or London or Moscow or Washington or Rome. No emperor or queen or president or General Secretary at the top. We have a leader, all right—but Jesus has ascended into heaven and is now to be found wherever we go.

We might say that instead of a *centripetal* unity—everything pulled toward one favored place or people in the center—God is creating a *centrifugal* kind of unity: outward, expansive, adventurous. It’s about *being sent out* to carry the good news and discovering the Spirit already at work ahead of us in every place, among every people.

That kind of unity was radical two thousand years ago, and it’s radical today. We live in a country that thinks of itself as valuing unity in diversity. Our money says “E pluribus unum”—out of many, one. And yet it’s also true that some have generally been more equal than others, and you’ve been closer to the center the closer you are to white, to Protestant, to male, cisgender, heterosexual. Sometimes that center has been reinforced implicitly through unspoken norms. Sometimes very explicitly through Jim Crow laws, redlining, or bathroom bills.

Those visions of this country have been intertwined throughout our history. Sometimes we've made real progress toward a fairer, more diverse society. Sometimes we've moved backwards. And that's true not just of the United States. Around the world we see movements toward justice and also movements toward domination or fragmentation or both, whether in the brutal devastation of Gaza, ethnic warfare in Sudan and Myanmar, or rising authoritarianism in so many places around the world.

As Christians this may distress us. But it shouldn't surprise us, and it shouldn't discourage us. It's been in our scriptures from the beginning. We can't manufacture unity on our own. On our own we'll either build bigger towers or fall apart into hostile camps.

Only the Spirit of God can bring real unity that neither erases differences nor finds in them reasons to divide. In the Spirit, our differences become beauty: precious reflections of God's infinite creativity, like the infinite variations in a flickering flame.

That Spirit is alive in us today. We received it when we were baptized into Christ. It's stirred up in us every time we renew our baptismal covenant as we do today. And it flings us out to proclaim the good news in a world without a center, without a tower—a world where Jesus is present in every language, wherever we go.