

15 May 2016  
Feast of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Tower of the Cross”

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

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Tower of Babel is one of those cool Bible stories you learn about in Sunday School. It's easy to teach, on one level. Simple and understandable. The people at that time, all speaking the same language, decided to build a tower *with its top in the heavens* to *make a name for themselves*. God, on the other hand, decided this was not a good idea, and so confused their languages so they could no longer speak to one another. The building project stopped, the Lord dispersed the people over the face of the earth, and that's how all the different languages of the earth came to be.

But if that's all we get out of this story, we haven't understood it. Because as Jesus taught His disciples after the resurrection, and as we heard in some of the readings this past Easter season, the Bible isn't just about giving us cool information - like how all the different languages came to be - *it's all about Jesus*. And so we need to try to understand how this story teaches us about Jesus. Then it will be more than just a cool story; it will be a helpful one. A saving one.

And the key, I think, is to look at what God said about this project, when He said: *and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them*. Or in other words, they will think they can do anything. They will think they can do everything. They will think they do not need God. Engineering, science, and a bit of ingenuity is all the help they will think they need. For look at what we can do! **Man is supreme. Man is God.**

Which sounds very much like the way so many people think today. We can do it. Nothing is impossible. We put a man on the moon. We hold in our hands computers which are amazingly powerful and can connect us to people all over the world. We are doing things today our ancestors never dreamed of. Surgeons transplant organs. Medical technology has created artificial limbs and 3D printers are even beginning to print out replacement body parts. Mankind keeps improving and getting better. We know more now than ever before. And there seems to be no limit to what we can do. *Nothing is impossible for us*. It seems as if the dream of Babel is finally becoming a reality - even with our mixed-up languages.

Except the picture is not all that rosy. Science and technology may be advancing, and new discoveries are being made, *but are we better off?* Is all the help we really need in our own two hands and in our minds? Yes, computers connect us but they also separate us. People are living longer but not necessarily living better. When a cure is found for one disease, another - and often worse one - mutates to take its place, or a new one comes along. And what about peace in a world where hostilities never cease, fear is the currency of terrorists, the comment sections on social media sites are among the most brutal places on earth, and even our own consciences accuse and torment us.

And then there's death. Some people deny it, some people hasten it, some people postpone it as long as they can. But if there really is one thing that unites all people in this world, that's it. We're all going to die. One day. Sooner or later. And no tower, no achievement, no name we make for ourselves, can stop it. In fact, that name we make for ourselves will just be chiseled onto our tombstones.

That was the trajectory of the people in the land of Shinar who built that tower. But God wanted more for them than that. And so He stopped them, to help them. He stopped them, to save them from themselves. He stopped them and scattered them, so that one day He could gather them around a different tower and give them what they need; what no tower into the heavens or effort of man could give them - a way to life. A way to Himself.

And that's exactly what we've been celebrating the past fifty days, the Easter season - that Jesus has provided that way. That not by a tower into the heavens, but by a cross; and not by man, but by God, the *unbridgeable* gap between the earth and the heavens **has been bridged**. That as God and man in one flesh, one person, the sin that separated us from our Father in heaven has been atoned for by Jesus' death, and the death that robs us of life has been overcome in His resurrection. That's Easter.

But still, that was not enough. The tower of the cross has been built by God, **but we need to be gathered back to it and around it**. For the peace of mind and peace of heart that we need, we need someone to teach us about that tower, to point us to the cross and to Jesus. We need the sin and wrong trust in our hearts to be overcome, that we not be like the people building the tower and trust in what we can do, and wrongly think nothing is impossible for us, but repent, confess, and turn away from that, and trust in the One who bridged the gap for us, in Jesus, and *correctly* believe that nothing is impossible for Him. **We need a Helper.**

And that's who today, Pentecost, is all about. **The Helper**. The Holy Spirit who, we heard Jesus say today, the Father will send in His name. The Spirit who will teach us of Jesus, and point us to Jesus, and give us the peace of heart and peace of mind that comes with the forgiveness of sin and the promise of a life that not even death can end. The gifts that Jesus won for us on the cross, are now given to us by the Helper, the Spirit.

And so when Jesus spoke of the gift of the Holy Spirit, He said this as well: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.* With the gift of the Spirit comes the gift of peace. A peace that doesn't come from the world, or from you and what you do, but only from God. From the Father, who sent His Son to build a heaven-reaching tower, and His Spirit to then gather all people to it and back to Himself.

And we heard that impressive list of folks who heard and were gathered on that first Pentecost - they were from all over the place: *Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.* But it didn't stop with them. The Spirit sent the apostles out even further to proclaim the Word through which the Spirit would work and continue to give His gifts of forgiveness and peace. For as the prophet Joel said, *in the last days God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh.* Men and women, Jews and Gentiles, young and old. A pouring out and gathering that *started* on the Day of Pentecost, *and hasn't stopped.*

Because you are here. You wouldn't be here were it not for the Spirit. The Spirit who is still being poured out and still working and gathering people to Jesus and His cross through the Word of God - the Word preached and the Word joined to the water of Baptism. The Word which points us to Jesus and connects us to Jesus. The Word through which the Helper is teaching you, forgiving you, and pointing you to the tower of the cross and testifying to you: There is your hope. There is your confidence. There is your peace. Peace in life and peace in death. *That our hearts not be troubled, nor be afraid.*

And so He has *gathered* us today in the midst of a world fraught with danger, sin, trouble, change, and much to be fearful and worried about. He has *gathered* us here today around the cross that is planted here - on this altar. For here is the Body and Blood that hung upon that cross, and the Body and Blood that then rose from the dead, that receiving this gift, our bodies too rise from the dead to life again, finally and fully free from all that troubles us here. Fully at peace in Jesus.

So by teaching us of the **past** and giving us confidence for the **future** we can deal with the **present**, and know that whatever is happening is not such a big deal after all. The world may be going crazy with its politics, political correctness, divisiveness, new kinds of wickedness and evil being invented every day, and false gods a-plenty, but none of that can win; none of that can conquer a child of the Father, in Jesus, with the Holy Spirit. Our God has conquered all our foes and provided us with a sure and certain future. We may not know how we will get to the future - the twist and turns in the road, the challenges and obstacles that face us - but we will get there. We have our Lord's promise. So there is peace, for we have certainty in our Lord. And we can rejoice, for we are not on our own, but have a Helper.

And so one day, Jesus will say to us what He said to His disciples, as we heard at the end of the Holy Gospel today: ***Rise, let us go from here***. When He spoke that to the disciples, Jesus was going to the cross to defeat sin and death for us there. When we hear Him speak those words, it will be from the places where our bodies lay, when we will ***rise*** and ***go*** from the dust to which we returned to life again - sin and death defeated and nothing but life ahead for us. Life, with our Saviour, with His name, and in His Kingdom, which will have no end. And the only tower we'll need to get there, we have: **the cross**.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.