Acts 2:1-21 (CEB)

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, “What does this mean?” Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.
The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
We’ve been working our way through the book of Genesis at our new Wednesday noontime Bible Study. This week, as it happened, we read and discussed chapter 11, the story of the Tower of Babel. It goes like this.

A few generations after Noah and his ark saved life on earth from the great flood, the people all spoke the same language and used the same words. As they migrated from the east, they settled down on a plain, and they said, “Let us make a name for ourselves.” So they made bricks, and prepared mortar, and set about building a city with a great tower that stretched high into the heavens.

When God saw what the people were doing, God said, “Oh, no. They are all one people, all speaking one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing they attempt now will be impossible.” So God confused their language and scattered them across the earth, giving them a fresh start, a chance to try again to live in accordance with God’s will. And thus arose all our diverse human languages and cultures and nations—or so the story goes.

What a heartbreaking thing, to think that in that moment, the potential God saw in humanity was the potential for evil, for harm, for hubris, for cruelty, rather than the potential for good. But then, humanity has used our incredible ingenuity and power to create nuclear weapons, and slavery, and DDT, and land mines disguised as children’s toys, and heroin, and apartheid, and for-profit prisons, and waterboarding, and climate change… In the quest to “make a name for ourselves,” to make ourselves great, we humans have poured an awful lot of energy and resources into endeavors that harm rather than heal, that divide rather than unite, that break down rather than build up. What a heartbreaking thing—and if it is heartbreaking for us, how much more so for God?

As I studied today’s scripture reading from the book of Acts, I was struck again and again by the echoes of the story our Bible Study group read this week from the book of Genesis. Today’s reading is another story about language, and the power of communication, and the potential of humanity when we all understand each other. It’s another story about God moving among humanity to give us another chance, calling us to a new way of being God’s people on earth.

In some ways, the Pentecost event is a reversal of the Tower of Babel. At Babel, there was confusion of languages; at Jerusalem, there was understanding across linguistic divides. At Babel, there was scattering to the ends of the earth; at Jerusalem, there was a gathering of people from every nation under heaven, all brought together in unity. But our story today is not a wholesale reversal of that older story. There are two important distinctions to be made.

First, the Pentecost event is not a return to that pre-Babel state of homogeneity, where all people were one nation, speaking one language, living in one location. The diversity of human languages is not erased. The variety of human nationalities is not smoothed out. The multiplicity of human geography is not undone. In the Pentecost moment, God creates not sameness, not uniformity, but understanding in the midst of diversity.

And second, from Babel to Pentecost, the focus changes. At Babel, the people are trying to make a name for themselves. They are seeking renown by their own initiative, according to
their own definitions. They are using their incredible ingenuity and power for their own purposes and for their own benefit. They are focused on themselves. At Pentecost, on the other hand, the disciples speak about God’s deeds of power. They do not toot their own horns; they do not brag about their own greatness; they do not seek fame or fortune for themselves. Rather, they speak of the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ. They proclaim the love that is stronger than hate, the life that is stronger than death, the call to find greatness in humility and leadership in service.

In the ongoing story of humanity’s trial and error, God continues to love us in spite of God’s heartbreak when we go astray. When we misdirect our energies and build monuments to ourselves rather than building a just world for all… When we are sidetracked by fear, when we turn away from suffering, when we don’t dare to speak even though we know we should… When we miss the point, miss the boat, miss a chance to make a difference… God continues to give second, third, tenth, hundredth, thousandth chances—way more chances than we humans, or I, at least, could ever manage to give. The story of the Tower of Babel is one; the story of Pentecost is another; there are as many more such stories as there are human beings, and then some.

But the stories of Babel and Pentecost teach us that these second, third, tenth, hundredth, thousandth chances are not meant for us to use our incredible human ingenuity and power to make a name for ourselves. They are not chances for us to put ourselves first, our needs above all others. They are not chances for us to further entrench the systems of domination and exclusion that are so insidious on this earth.

The second, third, tenth, hundredth, thousandth chances God gives us are chances to use our incredible human ingenuity and power, not to build a monument to our own greatness, but to build up the very realm of God, where outcasts are included, where hungry people are fed, where the poor receive good news, where captives are released, where the oppressed go free. A world where we study war no more, where black and brown lives are treated as though they really matter, where LGBTQ relationships are affirmed as the beautiful gift they really are, where sick people can get the treatment they need, where women’s bodies are protected, where men’s emotions are welcomed, where children can flourish, where elders have dignity, where the earth itself is a bountiful garden, tended with care.

And when we put our incredible human ingenuity and power to such good use, inspired by the Holy Spirit and united with our beautifully-diverse siblings from every nation under heaven—then I think we will hear God saying, not, “Oh, no,” but, “Oh, yes! This is only the beginning of what they will do! Nothing they attempt now will be impossible! Alleluia!”