Earlier this week the Presbytery of NYC held its quarterly stated meeting at the *Broadway Presbyterian Church* in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The theme for our meeting and our worship service for this quarter evolved around the Holy Spirit. Because afterall, we are in the season of Pentecost. Collectively we invoked the Holy Spirit to speak among us as we made prayerful decisions among the worshipping communities within our Presbytery.

Over the years, the Presbytery has had its shares of contentous and divided moments due to our differences in opinions and persectives of how we see things. At times we’ve had heated debates over the trivial procedures and policies, which led to much confusions, misunderstanding and even mistrusts, due to our language, custom and cultural upbringings. But like it or not, that is who we are, as one of the most diverse Presbyteries in our denomination. We acknowledge and confess that we all fall short of God’s expectation but we strive to live up to our calling while demonstrating the unity of the body in the midst of our diversity.

In the two familiar Pentecostal stories that we just read, we also caught a glimpse of how the Holy Spirit worked amongst its people, both in uniting and joining them in once voice AND scattering them and confusing them with different tongues. Even in the midst of chaos and confusions, the Spirit of God remained at work amongst its people.

In the Babel account as recorded in *Genesis*, it was described that the people were all gathered in one place and the *“whole earth had one language and of the same words”.[[1]](#footnote-1)* This was significant, because everyone can understand each other and is supposedly on the same page in harmony with one another. There was this sense of unity and ethnic personal pride, as the people rallied among themselves saying, ***“Come, let us BUILD OURSELVES a city and a tower with its top in the [highest] heavens, and let us MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES, or else we may be scattered upon the face of the earth.”[[2]](#footnote-2)***

It appears that those who were gathered in Babel knew exactly what they were doing. Nothing on eaerth was going to stop them in achieving what they wanted to achieve. All of a sudden, they found themselves in an uncharted territory where no man had gone before, kind of like making a landing on the Moon or Mars. This towering project would surely make a mark for the entire human race. They could reach as high as where God is, at least that’s what they thought.

When God saw what the people had done, God probably laughed. But on the other hand, God was probably concerned as well! God was concerned not because of what they had built up or achieved up to this point, but **what they have become** and **what potentially they would do next without seeking God’s approval first?** The people had indulged upon their own accomplishments rather than what God wills and enables them to do. As God said, **“*this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”[[3]](#footnote-3)***

Ever since Adam and Eve who rebelled against God’s command in the Garden of Eden, human beings had indulged on a course of downward spiral through their sinful disobedience against God. They think that they have a solution to any problem there is and that nothing is impossible to mankind. **The event that took place at Babel was a divine “course correction” of human condition, especially if its power were left unchecked or abused towards personal gain.** God had no choice but to intervene.

As painful as it may be, God rendered the punishment once again…by not sending another great flood this time. But instead, God ordered the “scattering” of the people “over the face of the whole earth”. Despite the seemingly harsh punishment of creating chaos and confusion, it turned into an opportunity for a new beginning. God showed that God was still in the business of creating and renewing each day, as the Spirit moves over the water of chaos in the formless void on the 1st day of creation and immediately after the Great Flood. God remained merciful to his people at the end and offered them yet another “2nd chance” towards a new beginning.

Similarly, as we read in our New Testament passage earlier in Acts. On the day of Pentecost, the people once again were gathered together in one place. Once again they were also filled with much fears – fear of not knowing what they would become. Fear of the influx of foreigners and other Gentile believers amongst them; fear of being persecuted and being dispersed due to their faith and beliefs. In the midst of such fears, God interrupted and showed up to calm their fears! As a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, divided tongues of fire were sent upon the people, which enabled them to speak in their own native language, yet somehow miraculously they were able to understand each other as well.

Over the years, many biblical scholars and historians argued that what happened on the day of the first Pentecost was a reversal (or a course correction) of the event that took place in Babel. Although these two events spanned approximately 2,300 years apart over the course of human and biblical history, nevertheless it was still the same Spirit that witnessed among the people across all linguistic, cultural, social, or ideological spectrums. It was still the same Spirit, the same breath of God that disseminate them and to offer them new lives, new beginnings, into different parts of the earth. God was at work once again.

From a sociological standpoint, these two events illustrated how we – the human race still got our works cut out for us in striving to work alongside with one another, instead of against one another. Much of our actions and thoughts are still motivated through our differences instead of what we have in common. Conflicts arise as a result.

From a theological standpoint, these two events demonstrated God’s faithfulness and sovereignty, as God graciously reached out to God’s own people, even though from time after time, the people had abandoned God, or even played the role of God themselves, in creating and destroying life in this world.

During the time of Babel, the Spirit not only reminded the people of who they once were and what they were capable of doing, but now during the time of Pentecost, the Spirit challenged the gathered community to take God’s message of hope one step beyond. The people must not be content with just staying to themselves. The Holy Spirit challenged them to take their faith beyond their comfort zone, outside of Jerusalem, and onto wherever God may be sending them to.

As the New Testament professor at Princeton Seminary - Eric Barreto once commented on this text, he said **“*Pentecost does not reverse the consequences of the tower, retreating to some imagined monolingual, monocultural idea. Rather ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences are preserved. The Holy Spirit serves as a “binding agent” enabling each person to be understood in his or her own native tongue.[[4]](#footnote-4)***

In the Babel account, it was **fear** that served as the binding agent that drives the building project of the tower: **Fear of dispersal, Fear of being scattered, Fear of living among the foreigners, of losing one’s identity, as well as the Fear of losing one’s control, power, and influence upon others.**

Furthermore, both the Babel and the Pentecost accounts emphasize the power of **human unity**, but not at the expense of the universal oneness and supremacy of one group over the others.[[5]](#footnote-5) That is NOT the type of ONEness that the Spirit wants us to seek today.

**The Spirit of Pentecost challenges us not only to open our eyes …so that we may see the world as God sees, but it challenges us to open our hearts so that we may extend God’s love towards the “others” around us….those who may look different, sound different, eat or perhaps even smell different from us.**

**Our ultimate identity and sense of belonging is that we ALL are a creation and a people of God, and that we ALL have a place and a seat at God’s heavenly banquet!**

**So on this Pentecostal Sunday, let us seek the wind, the breath and the Spirit of God. Trust that the Spirit may renew our commitment once again, to be the Apostolic church that we are commissioned to be – the body of Christ that not only looks within, but beyond; a body that embraces and reflects God’s grace and mercy; a body that not only connects and gathers into one place among ourselves but disseminates and sends us out as God’s presence in this world.** This is what the Pentecostal Spirit does for the scattering body of Christ!

God is not done with the church just yet, despite our past failures and neglects. As we are being reminded today, God has offered us repeated “2nd chances” through God’s redeeming grace. The Spirit has pledged to continue to renew, reshape and refresh us, just as it did on this day of Pentecost.

May the eternal flame of the Spirit continue to ignite us within our hearts, as we discern the leading of the Holy Spirit together.

In closing, I would like to share with you the powerful words of a familiar hymn written by the British scholar, theologian and hymn writer, Edwin Hatch (1835-1889) in 1878. As the British hymnologist J.R.Watson noted that through this hymn the author suggested that the breath of God – the “Ruach”, the Spirit of God ***“brings new life and love, purity and obedience, surrender and inspiration, and finally eternal life, as the hymn moves through various stages of Christian experience and discipline towards a unity with God.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*** You may follow or sing along also in Hymn #286 in our hymnal. ***Breathe on Me, Breath of God!***

***Breathe on me, Breath of God;***

***fill me with life anew,  
that I may love what thou dost love,***

***and do what thou wouldst do.***

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,*

*until my heart is pure,  
until with thee I will one will,*

*to do and to endure.*

***Breathe on me, Breath of God,***

***till I am wholly thine,  
until this earthly part of me,***

***glows with thy fire divine.***

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,*

*so shall I never die,  
but live with thee the perfect life,*

*of thine eternity.*

1. *Genesis 11:1* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Genesis 11:4* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Genesis 11:6* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eric D. Barreto, “*Negotiating Difference: Theology and Ethnicity in the Acts of the Apostles,” Word & World 31, No. 2 (2011): 129-37* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Howard, Cameron B. R. *Connections Year C, Volume 2, p.320* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-breathe-on-me-breath-of-god* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)