

THE SPIRIT'S RAINBOW

June 9, 2019

Pentecost

[Genesis 11:1-9](#)

[Acts 2:1-8,11-21](#)

(prayer)

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Does anyone remember the 1989 Don Bluth musical, animated film, [An American Tail](#)?

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An American Tail (spelt t-a-i-l) is a fun story of a family of mice (The Mousekewitzes) fleeing imperial Russian feline oppression in the Ukraine by immigrating to New York, where (legend has it) there are no cats in America. During a storm at sea, young Fievel Mousekewitz is swept overboard and presumed drowned. The moviegoer knows what the Mousekewitz family doesn't: Fievel finds an empty bottle and winds up floating into NYC. The plot revolves around Fievel trying to find his family - not only to be reunited, but to tell his father that there **are** cats in America.

The signature song in the movie was a split screen duo sung by Fievel and his sister, Tanya called [Somewhere, Out There](#). It won a couple of Grammys, but lost the Oscar to *Take my Breath Away* from Top Gun

*And even though I know
how very far apart we are
It helps to think we might be wishin'
on the same bright star*

We get to see Fievel and Tanya - in different places - looking up at the same moon.

I remember feeling a little **less** homesick when I first moved to Vancouver, by realizing that my friends/family in Edmonton were able to see the same big dipper that I was seeing.

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Sometimes, even when there is division, there is something that binds us.

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It doesn't matter what year we are in during the three year cycle within the Revised Common Lectionary, on Pentecost Sunday, Acts chapter two comes up every year in the recommended Sunday readings:

Year A

- Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30
- Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
- 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 or Acts 2:1-21
- John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39

Year B

- Acts 2:1-21 or Ezekiel 37:1-14
- Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
- Romans 8:22-27 or Acts 2:1-21
- John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Year C

- Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9
- Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
- Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21
- John 14:8-17, (25-27)

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In Year A, we can pair [Acts 2](#) with a reading from [Numbers](#) where seventy elders of Israel are inspired to prophesy by the Spirit of God.

In Year B, the Hebrew Bible reading is [Ezekiel](#) and the valley of dry bones.

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I must admit that I always look forward to Year Cs (*like this year*), when the Tower of Babel is set against the story of the post-Easter Pentecost.

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I will talk about the interesting connection between these two passages in a few minutes.

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But to understand the Tower of Babel story, it is important to understand its context.

Our passage from Genesis 11 began with these words: *Now the whole earth had one language and the same words*. Why was that the case?

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The first eleven chapters of Genesis contain a series of grand myths of faith -- or sacred legends. Now, I appreciate that some people insist on treating these chapters as *facts of history*. But I am in the camp with most modern biblical scholars who focus on the messages that lie behind the stories: that are steeped in mystery and metaphor.

I prefer to hear the narratives of the first eleven chapters of Genesis as stories told from a grandparent's knee that seek to explain *why the world is the way it is*.

- Granny, where did everything come from?
 - Well, before there was anything, there was God and God said, let there be light... let there be sky, and water and land and plants... let there be animals in the sky, animals under the water and animals on the land, and then God made us, in God's image.
 - After all that work, God took a rest.
 - Speaking of which... it's bedtime.

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- Grandpa, why do we have to work so hard to grow food in fields and raise animals for milk and meat?
 - Well, it wasn't always the case, in the beginning, the first people God made lived in a perfect Garden, but they didn't fully trust God, so they had to leave the garden and earn their living by their sweat.

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- Gramma, if we are all made by God, in God's image, why do we fight with people from other places; and sometimes even with our own people?
 - Sadly, my child, it started not very long after the first people left God's perfect garden. The first *war* was just a fight between two brothers: Abel, a farmer and Cain, a rancher. Cain of them got jealous of Abel and killed him. Let's just say that it got worse from there.

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- Look at that Gramps. Up in the sky... what is that?
 - Oh, that is a wonderful thing. It's called a **rainbow**. Sometimes after a storm, when the sun comes out, we get to see a *curve of colours* like that. God started putting those up in the sky a long time ago, after a great flood. I'll tell you about that: there was once a man named Noah...

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To understand the context of the Tale Of The Tower Of Babel, we need to understand the story of Noah and the Flood.

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In the narratives of Genesis as civilizations developed in the post-Cain-and-Abel world, humanity began to lose its way -- a fact that deeply disturbed God. In Genesis six, it says: *The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ... Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ... But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord. ... God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.* (Genesis 6:5-6,11-12,8,13)

As the story goes, God's method of destruction was to be a worldwide flood, but, it was not a *total* distraction of creation, instead it was to be a re-boot. Noah would ensure that some life would survive the Flood. Noah would build a grand boat and fill it with female and male specimens of each kind of animal to ensure those species survival. Noah's family would serve as the human specimens to ensure humanity's survival.

[this is the point where taking these stories *as metaphors rather than literal history* comes in handy -- you don't have get caught up worrying about the practical logistics; you can just accept the concluding premise that all of the life we see in our world today is here because some ancient ancestor survived the Flood as a passenger on Noah's Ark]

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The story goes on that... it rained long enough for the whole earth to be flooded; the ark remained afloat on the waters long enough (after it stopped raining) for all land-reliant life to be extinguished; then the sun came out and the waters receded; land reappeared and plants grew again.

Eventually, the ark ran aground on a mountain where all of the humans and animals exited the boat and went about repopulating the world as part this creation do-over: being fruitful and multiplying.

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At the beginning of the Noah story, God regretted creating humans in the first place. After the

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flood was over, God shows a tinge of further regret for having gone through with the destruction of the world. It seems that the smell wafting off of a sacrificial altar Noah had built softened the divine heart: *And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. I am establishing my covenant with you, Noah, and your descendants after you, and with every living creature as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. This is the sign of the covenant that I make: I have set my bow in the clouds. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.*

- So, grandchild, the rainbow is a reminder that God remains committed to us, even when we disappoint God.

The grandchild thanked the grandfather for the cool rainbow story. But something didn't quite sound right.

No... it was not: *how did Noah stop the lions from eating the gazelles?*

- Gramps, if all of the people in the world today are related to the one family that came out the ark, why doesn't everyone in the world speak the same language?
 - My, you are bright one, little one.
 - You see, many years after Noah, there was a group of people (in the land of Shinar) who built a mighty city and right in the middle of that city, they built a really, really, really tall tower...

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We heard that story as our old testament reading today.

- God saw their single-minded determination and said, *this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.* So, to slow down their ambitions, God *confused* their speech and scattered them all over the earth.
- The city was never finished. To this day, grandchild, people still call those old ruins: *Babel* (which means "confused").

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To the ancient Hebrew storytellers, if the myth of the rainbows origins is to make sense in the known and experienced in a world of different nations and languages, the legend of the Tower of Babel is a necessary addition.

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When I think of these two old stories as part of one narrative, I imagine an *American-Tail*-like truth.

Even in a post-babel world, the scattered people would all still be able to look up and see rainbows of promise. Their single-minded arrogance may have divided them, but it did not void the covenant between God and all flesh.

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In Jesus' time, seven weeks after the Passover, pilgrims came to Jerusalem to honour the spring wheat harvest during what became known as the Festival of Weeks ([Shavu'oth](#)).

In greek speaking circles, this feast was known as "Pentecost"... because seven weeks (counting both the first and last day) is fifty days (pente = five).

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In the book of Acts (originally written in greek), today, we heard: *When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] were all together in [Jerusalem].*

The text doesn't clearly tell us whether the followers of Jesus had stayed in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus or whether they had left after Passover and returned for Shavu'oth.

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In hebrew culture, Pentecost served as a dual celebration -- the first fruits of the harvest and a commemoration of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

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For the followers of Jesus, that day became significant because of what happened that first Pentecost after the first Easter.

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It started inside the house where the apostles were meeting... it was multi-sensory:

- a loud sound (like a violent wind) was **heard**;
- tongues of fire were **seen** resting on each of them;
- they felt **touched** by the Holy Spirit;
- which enabled them to **speak** in other languages.

(no indication in the text if the senses of **taste** and **smell** were affected too)

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Then it spilled out onto the streets.

The *wind-like* sound drew people to the apostles' house, where they could hear the followers of Jesus talking.

It didn't take long for people (in that diverse, international crowd) to realize that everyone of them was able to understand what was being said by these Galileans, even though there were (at least) fifteen different native languages among them.

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Some onlookers wrote the whole experience off as some kind of early morning drunken frenzy, but Simon Peter gave the Spirit of God the credit, by quoting the prophet Joel -- *God declares, one day, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: male, female; young and old; slave and free!*

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The Spirit of God removes characteristics that divide (boundaries of age, gender, social status, nationality) and creates a shared environment of unity and equality.

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Of course, those distinctive characteristics still existed: it's just that they no longer served to separate people when they allow the Spirit to affect them.

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Here's the juxtaposition of this Pentecost's Genesis and Acts readings:

- In Babel, a single-minded arrogance was scattered in confusion.
- In Jerusalem, a multi-national diversity was brought together in understanding.

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Peter sees the profoundness of the anti-Babel nature of the Pentecost experience. *We may have our differences, but they do not divide us thanks to the Spirit.*

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There was a Babel scattering, but not so wide to void the rainbow's promise .

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The rainbow is a powerful metaphor... distinct colours from a single light interacting with water droplets.

Everyone looks at rainbows. No matter how often we get to see one, we stop what we are doing and stare when one appears in the sky. We know that they don't last long - that the circumstances have to be perfect for them to appear. And so we allow busyness to pause so that we can take in the wonder of refracted light: Differences and Unity on display.

We long for the beauty of rainbows and all of the wonder and hope they represent.

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The Spirit at Pentecost did not eliminate differences among the diverse pilgrims, but she enabled understanding. The differences remained, but they were bridged.

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On Friday, I braved the rain to witness the rainbow flag raising at the Leduc Civic Centre.

On the Facebook event, the city created, I noticed a number of people reacted with "angry faces"

☹️. One FB commenter complained that this flag was not for everyone... only some. Others replied that the rainbow IS a symbol of all: diversity and unity on display.

For the first time ever, the city of Leduc has formally declared this next week, Pride Week.

This is an important secular declaration.

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And no less a needed faithful declaration in light of the Pentecost experience.

Where you come from doesn't make you any less part of the God created human family.

Your social status doesn't make you any less part of the God created human family.

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Your age doesn't make you any less part of the god created human family.

And... regardless of your gendre identity or sexual orientation, you are no less part of the god created human family.

The Spirit did not discriminate on Pentecost.

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Let us allow the spirit's wind be heard,

Let us allow the spirit's fire touch us all... so that all may be one, as we were created to be..

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Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit, to empower us as agents of God's liberating love. Amen.

#12MV "Come Touch Our Hearts"