



Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 (and Genesis 11:1-9)

In his classic *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut paints an interesting picture of a world quite different from that of World War II. In his new world, planes fly backward, magically quelling flames as they draw fragmented bombs into steel containers and suck them back up into their bellies. Guns on the ground suck metal fragments from the pilots, crew, and planes. Weapons are shipped backed to factories, where they are carefully disassembled and broken down into their constituent minerals. The minerals are shipped to specialists all over the world who “hide them cleverly” in the ground, “so they never hurt anybody ever.” What an imagination!

Walter Brueggemann is one of the world’s great teachers about the Hebrew prophets. He describes the prophets and poets of ancient times as being without pedigree, uncredentialed, rooted in the covenantal tradition, who through the gift of their insight imagined their world differently from the harsh realities of daily living. Brueggemann translates their imagination from the chaos of ancient times to our own. In his book, *Prophetic Imagination* we are challenged to “reframe” so we too can experience the social realities that are before our very eyes.

Imagine, or reframe with me a world so interconnected that everyone speaks the same language and works to alleviate pain and suffering. Imagine or reframe a world so interconnected and relatable that the burdens of one individual become the burden of everyone. Imagine or reframe a world where love and compassion are the ethical basis of all the decisions we make.

I was born and raised in Liberia, West Africa, a country of 16 different dialects. My dad was a Lutheran pastor and church developer. I remember that the first time I heard my dad preach about the Tower of Babel, the story confounded my young mind. I struggled to fathom the chaos the biblical communities faced when suddenly everyone had a different tongue, and no one could understand what was being communicated. I could relate because tribal identity or differences in Liberia often formed the basis of how people treated one another. This remains true today—we live in a world where people are treated according to how they look or what language they speak. This becomes evident in the rhetoric that is used today by our leaders to describe refugees and immigrants. My young mind wrestled profoundly with tribal ethnic conflicts. My tribe, the Kpelle, was numerically large but didn’t really have much social, political or economic clout. I struggled to fathom why people who shared the same nationality, but different speech, could not find a way to co-exist. In the naivete of my young mind, I had a prophetic imagination: I thought to myself, “Wow...how cool it would be to speak one language and play with kids from the other tribes. How cool would it be if we didn’t have all the tribal fights?” What an imagination!



The oral tradition that gave rise to the Babel narrative allowed ancient communities to grapple with the complexities of their times: diverse languages, human migration, the formation of communal structures, and the rules that govern how people live together. In the Babel narrative, people are dispersed and confused. In the Pentecost narrative, they are gathered with a new language given by the Spirit. The author of Acts describes the gathering this way: They are Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—all declaring the wonders of God.

Those who witnessed the Pentecost experience asked, “What does this mean?” In a way, this is the author’s attempt to reframe the world through the prophetic imagination described by Brueggemann. It is also an invitation to us to participate in our own version of prophetic imagination. “What does this mean?” is an invitation to all of us to partner with the Spirit in the activity of reframing. How do we reframe our world - from being a place where we are scattered - to becoming a place where we are gathered into a beloved community?

As an immigrant and refugee, I feel called to the task of reframing Babel and Pentecost—the world of scattered and gathered. I feel called to lend my voice to the task of imagining a world where the treatment of refugees, migrants and “the least of these” becomes a true measure of our moral and ethical commitment. Refugees are often the first and last casualties of war: helpless and defenseless...left at the mercy of war profiteers and forces beyond their own sphere of control. The truth is that no one volunteers to be a refugee. Refugees love their countries of origin, but because of circumstances beyond their control they must resort to the most basic of human instincts: survival. When refugees find safety and hope in another land, they often give their best in service to their new-found homeland.

So, what does all this mean for you as people of faith? What does it mean for you to read the Pentecost text in our current reality? What does it mean for you to imagine the world as it could be, not just as it is? Let’s be partners in reframing the narrative about refugees and immigrants.

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