

Speak Louder Please, I Can't Hear You  
 Genesis 11: 1-9 / Acts 2: 1-13

Good morning, This morning I invited three musicians to preach with me: Alonzo and Brad on drums and Chuck on the piano.

This is where we live: between Babel and Pentecost, at, around and within many borders.

The two events described in both Testaments have powerful connections.

At the beginning of the story in Babel, people had one language.  
 In Pentecost, people had many languages.

In Babel, people migrated in order to be together.  
 In Pentecost, migrating people were put together.

In Babel, people wanted to go up to touch heavens.  
 In Pentecost, heavens comes down and touch people.

In Babel, people want to find a name.  
 In Pentecost, a name is give to them.

In Babel, people plan to build a city, the city of humankind.  
 In Pentecost, a new city is given to them, the city of God.

In Babel, people are afraid of being dispersed.  
 In Pentecost, people are gathered together.

In Babel, people speak one language, apparently without confusion.  
 In Pentecost, people are confused with people talking in other languages.

In Babel, people go from clarity to confusion  
 In Pentecost, people go from confusion to clarity

In Babel, people understand for the first time, the disconnections between language and home.  
 In Pentecost, language and home are integrated.

In Babel, people lose their ability to talk in one language.  
 In Pentecost, people create bridges and gain abilities to communicate.

In Babel, God decided to visit people and mess them up.  
 In Pentecost, God decided to visit people and unite them.

Both in Babel and Pentecost, people are visited by God

Both in Babel and Pentecost brings a blessing  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost brings confusion  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, people get amazed  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, people ask what does this mean?  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, various ways of connection and disconnections are created  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, there is a new beginning  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost are blurred and today we must think one in relation to each other, inverting the signs that one is bad and the other is good.  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, voices are central elements of the narrative,  
 Both in Babel and Pentecost, voices are affected by God's presence, voices are changed, and relations altered.

We all live between Babel and Pentecost. But how are we to construct the city of God within the city of humankind?  
 What shall we do to speak and to hear God's language?  
 How can we move from Babel from Pentecost?  
 OR How do we know we are living in Babel or Pentecost?  
 Where is it that God is visiting us?

Drums could you speak about Babel and Pentecost?  
 Piano can you also please speak about Babel and Pentecost?.

I remember one day when Daisy Machado, a professor of church history now teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was giving a lecture many years ago. While she was there speaking, I was deeply touched by her. But more than her speech, that morning I was hit by her voice. Her voice was trembling. As she developed her argument about immigrants in US, I knew that what she was talking about was too close to her people, to her life, to her skin. As she talked, her voice was taken by the hurtful events of the story she was telling us about. In her voice, Babel was present in the killings of her people, but Pentecost was present in the tonality and the vibrations of her voice. Screaming and shouting between Babel and Pentecost, she was trying to find ways for the city of God to be built in this country.

That day I realized that we are always moving between Babel and Pentecost, Pentecost and Babel. Just the other day, I was in a coffee shop here in Louisville and all of sudden a group of weirdoes arrived and sit on a table just behind me. I could not prevent myself from hearing their stories and as I listened to it, I was surprised by the stupidity of their stories, stories that I could not make too much sense. But then, I decided to move my chair a little closer to them in an intentional move to eavesdrop their conversations. And what a powerful experience it was to eavesdrop their conversation. I discovered that they were mentally ill people getting together for coffee. Their stories moved me so deeply

that I started to ponder about the ways in which the city of God is created by nonsensical stories and by eavesdropping. A dog crossing a bridge and a UofL hat that was received as a birthday gift. A mother who had just died and a brother who missed deeply his twin brother now locked up in an institution.

Yes, the city of God is made of stories, stories of people who cannot make much sense out of their lives, people interrupted, people who cannot put up with the higher levels of normalcy in our society, stories of people who have so many problems that they are often left alone to themselves.

Those stories made me remember the stories I heard when I was a pastor...

A married woman confessing in tears, her desires for another man whom she had never seen. She had fallen in love with this man over the phone.

A street man in Sao Paulo who was an alcoholic for so many years, telling me that he had destroyed his entire life, lost his job, his wife and two daughters because of his addiction.

Another street man singing the blues on an empty square saying "Oh lord why have you forsaken me..."

Among immigrants, a woman telling me how she had to have sex with her boss otherwise he would call the immigration to deport her.

Most of the times, as much as I tried to listen to them, I had to ask them "speak louder please, I can't hear you..." Voices of shame and embarrassment, becoming smaller and smaller, to the point of almost becoming silent.

Voices whose tonalities and strange reverberations are there for us to listen to, to pay attention. These stories were like Pentecost stories turned into Babel endings. And yet, there they were, searching for the same Spirit of clarification and power that came upon the disciples on Pentecost as they shared their stories of becoming scattered. In each story, Babel and Pentecost pulsing together, under the same tonality and a range of vibrations.

### Voices and Absurd

I grew up believing that God would save me from all the disgraces of the world. The theology of providence that I learned told me that if I followed some proper rules I would never be hit too hard by life. But as I grew up, I started to see that there were some indisputable situations in which God's providence was not there for those who used to follow appropriately all the right theological rules. To come to terms with the fact that God was not ALWAYS good put me in a desolate space. And I entered in a profound

theological crisis. It seemed like the voices of Pentecost were not as assuring as they used to be, and that the coming of the Spirit was not always there the way I had thought they were. Babel seems them as it sometimes seems today, so pervasive.

That frustration was so deep that in my master degree I wrote a 250 page thesis on the notion of the absurd, especially in Albert Camus.

As I researched, I discovered that the word *absurd* comes from the latin AB-SURDUS, which means: the noise is so high that it makes one deaf. The absurd is that which one cannot hear, that which one has no structure to cope with, that which we cannot make sense.

Albert Camus use to say that the absurd was like the death of a child, life not lived in its overabundance, or the separation of a couple who love each other but cannot stay together. Death for him was the ultimate manifestation of the absurd.

The ab-surdus is a noise that we cannot hear. A friend of mine told me this story about a woman who had four sons. One day she receives the notice that one of them had died... after couple months, she hears again that another of her sons is dead, and after two more weeks another son died. This woman became deaf. She could not take it, the noise that came form the voices of those who told her these absurd news was too loud for her. And since she could not hear the news of a loss of her last son, she became literally deaf.

Drums and piano, please play for us the absurd, give us a sense of her story...

Voices and ears, noise and absurd... Voices have to do with our ears. Your voice comes to me and make home in my eardrums. The ears are the uncanny place of the other (Derrida).

When you speak, your voice produces an effect of nearness that it is as if you invaded me. You become so close to me that we become intimate. How then, do I make yourself at home in my ears?

In his book *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche says that there is '*Danger in the voice*. Sometimes in conversation the sound of our own voice confuses us and misleads us to assertions that do not at all reflect our opinion.'

Due to these confusions and misleading, we have to train our ears to receive each other, to hear each other' stories, to get closer to the voice of an other, and to keep asking each other: "Louder Please, I Can't Hear You."

For the City of God is made of shared stories. Stories of loss and madness, stories of healing and transformation, stories of redemption and destruction, stories of success and stories of failures, stories of life and stories of death.

For the city of God to happen in our midst, we must lend our ears especially to those who have had their voices shut for a long while, those who have never had the chance to speak. For them, I have the obligation to lend my ears and to keep asking them: “Louder please, I can’t hear you!”

It was July 2004. I was in Bahia, a vibrant state of Brazil with 80% of its population composed of Afro-Brazilians. I went to visit Mercado Modelo, the “Model Market” where slaves were negotiated in the 18th century. Under the main floor, there was a large basement where people who came from Africa were thrown after arriving in Brazil, and kept there until they were negotiated to slave owners. Women and men of all ages were kept under the market with water covering their bodies up to their waist. On the walls, there were holes with images of Christian saints, trying to teach them a proper and civilized faith. This place was opened for visit only a few years ago by the local government after the complaints of various Afro-descendent movements who wanted to show a very important part of the history of Brazil, a part of our history that nobody wants to hear. It was there, in that basement, that I had a conversion moment. All of a sudden I heard a myriad of voices indecipherably speaking and shouting out loud to the point of almost making me deaf. It was as if words and sounds that I had never heard took my mind and my heart. There were sounds of weeping mothers and fathers separated from their daughters and sons, shouts of utter despair from people who were taken away from their homes to a strange place, desolation and unredeemable cries of free people all of sudden turned into slaves. Nonetheless, among these sounds and voices, there were also screams of resistance, words of command not to give up and prayers to all the Orixás for deliverance.

Drums, play these cries, remember me of these drums in my ears...

As I heard those voices, I realized that I have never lent my ears to this part of the history of my country and my people. Why did it take me so long to be able to hear those voices that formed who I am? Why has nobody ever told me about them and why have they never told me they were part of my self and my history?

That day I realized that when I speak with my own voice, my voice is a blur of silenced and loud voices that speak inside of me. Voices that are unknown to me, voices that are telling me things that I am not able to understand, voices that are screaming inside of me and I cannot not hear them, voices of others that are trying to find their way into the volume of my voice. And yet, they make me what I am trying to be, they subvert my

thoughts, they challenge me every time I try to speak just for myself and not for my community, the community of those who lived before me and those who are yet to come.

These voices in the Mercado Modelo taught me that I cannot develop my spirituality without those voices, black voices, disrupting and undoing my theological frames of reference and indexes, and giving me life. I learned that my theological grounds and the spirituality that is shaped from these grounds must be this place between Babel and Pentecost, where indiscriminate sounds and incomprehensible voices abound, voices that I can hear and understand, and voices that are both unspeakable and untranslatable, near and afar.

In order to stand on sound theological ground, we must learn to pay attention to the voices that went unheard and were lost in the loud archives and monotone records of the official history of the Western world.

I am a result of many voices and when I speak I have many voices speaking in and through me. I am also a result of a African American nameless man who would come to the corner of my father's Roman Catholic house when he was a boy. With his accordion, this man would not say a word but only sing for one hour every Sunday afternoon. Time went by and this man disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to him. Time went by and one day, my father already been a young adult, is walking up on one street in Sao Paulo, Rua Barao de Jaguara, when he and his two brothers hear this familiar song coming from inside of this church. They suddenly stop and ask each other: isn't that the song that that man used to sing? "Yes, it is," was their answer. They go inside to check it out and guess what: they become Presbyterians. My uncle becomes an elder and a leader of this church for 40 years. And my father gets to know my mother and here I am. I am also a result of that black nameless man's voice singing the Pentecost to the eardrums of my grandparents.

Piano, what was the hymn this man used to play? (Piano plays a hymn until the end of the sermon.)

The city of God in our hearts is also made of told and untold stories that run from Babel to Pentecost and from Pentecost to Babel... stories of absurdities and stories of joy, stories of people who cannot make it, of people who fall short, who let other people down, who cannot afford to deal with oneself anymore... stories that are unheard of and too scary to be told.

The city of God is a place where we intentionally lend our ears to one another, offering some intimacy, training our eardrums to hear the absurd, to listen to the uncanny, and to

provide a space for the poor to scream until they have a chance to tell their stories. As Avital Ronell says, “sometimes you have to scream to be heard.”

And this is also how the grace of God provides to us, through our eardrums and through our stories. And the city of God happens in shouts of joy and within the trembling of our voices... So here is how the city of God happens: speaking and listening, singing and silencing, being able to talk and to hear, mouth to ear and ear to mouth. This is how Pentecost and Babel collide in the construction of the city of God: by developing our spiritualities, by making our organic theologies grow, weaving God’s story with our stories, the Bible narration with the narration of our lives, Jesus life with our lives.

And here is the demand for all of us who live between Pentecost and Babel, at, around and within borders: let us continuously call upon the Spirit as we offer a hospitable place to each other in our ears, until we get to the point where speaking and listening become the same thing, your tongue in my ear, my ear in your mouth, always negotiating our sacred spaces, our becomings, our spiritualities, re-writing our stories between Babel and Pentecost by the power of the Spirit of God, translating each other and expanding what we know and what we wish we knew about ourselves.

As you leave this place today, remember that God in charges you to listen both to young and old voices... And when we are getting deaf because we are listening to so many absurd stories, because our eardrums cannot attend anymore to the tonalities and vibrations of the world’s noise, let us again and again, pray without ceasing, call upon the Spirit, and say

GOD: “Speak Louder please, I can’t hear you.”