

# A Name for Ourselves

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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On this Pentecost Sunday when the church remembers the descent of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church, I want to begin, naturally, with basketball. ☺

Like many, I have shamelessly jumped on the Toronto Raptors playoff bandwagon. I am ordinarily not much of a basketball fan, but it's been hard not to get swept up in the excitement of Canada's only NBA team a win away from a championship.

I came across an interesting story this week about one of the Raptors emerging stars.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, Pascal Siakam was once on the path to the priesthood! He grew up in a small town in Cameroon and when he was eleven, his dad sent him off to the seminary school where he would spend the next seven years of his life.

The first few years were promising. Pascal excelled in his studies and was generally an obedient and enthusiastic student. That changed when he was around fourteen or fifteen. He grew disillusioned with his life in the school. He didn't want to be a priest. He didn't want what his dad wanted.

He would occasionally walk by a mansion in the town that was owned by a former NBA player. He wondered what it would be like to be a celebrity like that.

Pascal grudgingly stayed in the seminary school until his graduation at eighteen. That summer, he attended a basketball camp put on by this former NBA player.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/23396205/nba-pascal-siakam-6000-mile-journey-raptors-stardom](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/23396205/nba-pascal-siakam-6000-mile-journey-raptors-stardom)

To make a long story short, after attending this camp over the next two summers, Siakam was eventually noticed by a scout which led to a scholarship opportunity at a college in America which led to being drafted by the Raptors, which led to him starring in the 2019 NBA final in only his third pro season.

It's a great story. I was drawn to it for a number of reasons. First, it's rare to see a pro athlete whose story includes time studying to be a priest! And stories of underdogs are always inspiring.

It's also incredible to see someone achieve so much in so little time. He has gone from never playing organized basketball to starring in the NBA finals in the same amount of time that I have been a pastor at this church!

But I was also drawn to the story because I think it illustrates a very basic and primal feature of our human experience.

Pascal Siakam wanted to make a name for himself.

He didn't want someone else's agenda for his life. He wanted to stand out, to choose his own adventure, to achieve something big, to be noticed, to be admired, to achieve fame and fortune.

This is true for all of us, I think, to varying degrees.

We have all kinds of ways of trying to secure a name for ourselves. There are the usual suspects—money, success in business, athletics, music, writing, being the top of the class, our children's accomplishments.

And, of course, social media opens up vast new domains for name building. Now we can make a name for ourselves based on the identities that we curate online, by how many likes our pictures or clever anecdotes or stories or blog posts (!) garner in the digital realm.

Parents even try to make a name for their children right after they're born! It's fascinating to compare the names that parents gave their children fifty years or so to now.

Naomi worked at a daycare when we were first married. She would come home and talk about some of the babies she worked with and I would marvel at the names people gave their children. Names like D'Artagnan (i.e., The Three Musketeers), Luna, Tuffy. I felt sorry for these poor kids who would be explaining how to spell their names to teachers for the next few decades.

In the past, names were often given to honour family members and solidify ties to ethnic histories and the broader community.

Now, we name to imprint our children with original uniqueness.

It's an interesting cultural shift which speaks volumes about our priorities. The desire to stand out, to make a name for ourselves has become something of a cultural imperative!

We are no longer invited to find our truest selves and our place in the world by looking out—to the families and communities and stories we are a part of—but by looking inward, where we will discover our true, utterly unique selves.

Some of this is good and a welcome correction to the stifling conformity that characterized previous generations. But, like most correctives, I suspect it's gone too far.

There is a good deal of research indicating that young adults are very often finding the pressure to construct a unique identity for themselves and project it to the world to be a heavy and at times paralyzing burden.

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In Genesis 11:4, we read:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."

For many of us, the word "Babel" is only a vaguely familiar one.

It's the place where selfish human beings decide they want to build a tower that reaches up to God. They are afraid of what will happen if they are scattered and they want to take their futures into their own hands. And so, God scatters and confuses them.

It's kind of a weird story on the face of it. Was God *threatened* by the potential of human beings? What's so bad about building a city? Isn't teamwork a good thing?

Some commentators wonder if the story is more positive than what we usually assume. Perhaps it is simply describing the origins of diverse cultures. People desire uniformity and sameness, but God desires diversity.

We tend to assume that God is punishing the people for behaving badly, but there is nothing in the story itself that explicitly says that the confusing of languages was punishment.

But even once we acknowledge this, the story of Babel does seem to represent the culmination of a selfish slide that begins with Genesis 3, where the first humans perked up their ears at the serpent's whisper, "You can be like God..."

What better way to make a name for yourself than that?!

What follows is shame, guilt, expulsion from the garden, the violence of Cain and Abel, and the depravity of Noah's generation.

The story of Babel is something like a hinge between the fallout of Eden and God's covenant promise to Abram (Gen 12) which sets the redemption story in motion.

Whatever we make of various interpretations of the story, there does seem to be an indictment of this human desire to "make a name for ourselves."

In the goodness of the garden, the first human is created and named by God. After Eden, the human story turns to one of seeking to seize hold of a name for ourselves.

And so, Babel is the place where God confuses and scatters this human impulse.

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Let's fast forward to Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost.

As Christians, I suspect that we often think that Pentecost is just the name of the day when the Holy Spirit fell upon the church with tongues of fire and where Peter preached an impressive sermon that got a whole bunch of converts.

But there's much more to the story than that.

For starters, Pentecost was a Jewish holiday long before it was a Christian one. Our text begins with, "*When* the day of Pentecost had come..." which points to the fact that it was already a holiday.

In the Jewish world, Pentecost was and is also known as Shavuot, the day when faithful Jews would remember God giving to them on Mt. Sinai the Torah, the Law.

The word "Pentecost" comes from the Greek word meaning "fiftieth." In Judaism, it is the fiftieth day after Passover. In Christianity, it is the fiftieth day after Easter.

And what happens in Jerusalem fifty days after Easter? Well, we see the coming of the Holy Spirit in power to the early disciples.

There is this spectacular imagery of tongues of fire resting upon the people, of strange and unexpected languages proclaiming God's deeds of power."

We see Peter's powerful linking of the descent of the Spirit with the prophet Joel and with the promise of Jesus himself. We see the Spirit giving birth to the church.

We see the Spirit pouring out life to all people, men, women, regardless of age, race, class, social status.

We learn that the Holy Spirit is the response to a long-awaited hope of Israel foretold by the prophets.

In our reading, Peter's sermon is cut short. He goes on to proclaim the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. He urges them to repent and be baptized.

And three thousand people were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41). This is more than Luke just bragging about a really effective revival meeting.

If we go back to the first Pentecost, the giving of the Law, we remember that while Moses was up on the mountain, the people of Israel were busy melting down their jewelry and bowing down to a golden calf.

Moses comes down and is irate at this display of idolatry. He gathers the sons of Levi, tells them to strap on their swords, and sends them off on a gruesome task of retribution.

Exodus 32:28 says that three thousand people fell on that day.

So, at the first Pentecost, three thousand were killed in an act of religious violence; and at the second Pentecost, three thousand were forgiven and given life in the name of Jesus.

The symmetry is supposed to grab our attention.

The descent of the Spirit undoes the violence of that first Pentecost.

It bears witness to the One who was able to faithfully keep the Law and resist idolatry where the Israelites were unfaithful.

It also undoes the ambition and confusion and scattering of Babel.

It liberates human beings from the desire to secure status, meaning, purpose and identity apart from the God who created us, who forgives us, who lived and died for us, and who will come again in glory to judge us and lead us to life.

Pentecost saves us from the desire to make a name for *ourselves* by giving people from every tribe and tongue a *new name* to unite them. The name of Jesus Christ.

Rather than seeking names motivated by our own insecurities, our own fears, our own ambitions, Pentecost reminds us that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21).

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This is good news.

It is good news because the names we secure for ourselves are never enough. No matter how much any of us accomplishes, no matter how well-known or how admired we are out there in the world or in the smaller domains of our local communities and families, all of our accomplishments will fade away into the mists of time.

We can't build a high enough tower.

David Brooks is a writer for the *New York Times*. He has written a handful of best-selling books about human politics, moral development, etc. His most recent book is called *The Second Mountain*.

It's the most autobiographical of his books. He confesses that he spent the first half of his life trying to "build his tower." He achieved all that he set out to do—he got a top-notch education, became a best-selling author. He made a name for himself. He calls this "the first mountain."

And when he got to where he thought he wanted to go, he realized that he was miserable. It hadn't made him happy. He was a best-selling author, but it didn't fulfill him like he thought it would. His marriage had fallen apart, he had few close friends, and felt adrift.

He slowly came to the realization that the point of life wasn't to build a name for *himself* as much as to give himself away in service to others.

He realized that life isn't so much about piling up accomplishments and accolades as it is about learning how to serve, to devote yourself to something larger than yourself. To love, specifically. He calls this "the second mountain."

If we are wise, most of us come to this realization along the journey of life, too. All our striving to secure a name for ourselves eventually doesn't amount to a whole lot.

The role of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to Jesus Christ—to what he has done for us, and to the lives he calls us to live.

We were created not to make a name for ourselves but to live fully in and through the name of Jesus Christ. To live lives characterized by the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

This does not obliterate our individuality and uniqueness. These fruits will be expressed in different and beautiful ways in each of our lives and the specific contexts in which God has placed

us.

The name of Jesus does not drag us back to stultifying conformity but to the wonder of self-giving love and the many different ways in which this love makes its way in the world.

If we give our lives over to making a name for ourselves, we will live smaller lives of acquisitiveness, fear, anxiety, and restless longing. We will be confused and scattered.

But if we call upon the name of the One who offers to take this burden from us?

Well, then we will be saved—not just in the ultimate sense, although this is true, thanks be to God, but also in the sense that we will realize that our value and our worth come not from what we manage to achieve, but in simply being a dearly-loved child of God.

And knowing that God holds our past, present, and future in his hands, and that nothing can separate us from this love, in this life or in the life to come.

Amen.

