

The Tower of Babel

June 16, 2023

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ 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; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." ⁵ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

"In the beginning..." These words open the Book of Genesis and are the first three words of the Bible. It is how you begin a look back into your own history and roots. Such is the case with the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Even though it is the first book of the Bible, it was written and compiled at a time when God's people were struggling with their identity and purpose...when they are in exile in Babylon. It was written after the judges, after King David, after the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians, after the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

Not written by a single author, Genesis is a composition of ancient stories, edited together, to help people who are struggling with their identity, in a foreign land, to discover who they are.

It's a little bit like Henry Louis Gates, who hosts the PBS series, "Finding Your Roots." He often begins a story by asking "Who are your people? Where do you come from?" And then the show unfolds as he dives into the genealogy and history of the individual he is interviewing.

The story of the Tower of Babel is one of our stories. It is tucked between two genealogies and follows on the heels of the story of Noah. God makes the covenant with Noah and then we read about the descendants of Noah and how they spread out on the earth. Then, in nine verses describing the fall of a great tower and the scattering of people, and then it abruptly moves on to a different genealogy that takes us to Abram.

It does make one wonder, doesn't it, why the editors of this great book of Genesis, felt the need to insert this story before God chose Abram to give birth to a nation – a nation with a calling to be a blessing to the world. Perhaps it is a cautionary tale about the human impulse to build empires, which do not bless all people. These towers of power and towers of terror – these soul crushing empires are a far cry from the communities of love and justice God calls us to create.

Did you hear the part about bricks in this story? Bricks connect this story with slavery under Pharaoh in another story about the crushing oppression of empire. Empires are built on the backs of people at the bottom. The story of the Exodus opens with God hearing the cries of the oppressed as Pharaoh builds a name for himself.

The people who are hearing this story, the people in exile, have been ravaged by yet another empire, another king, making a name for himself, by amassing wealth, asserting military strength, and oppressing, killing, and exiling people.

We may not relate to the word empire so much anymore, even though they continue to be built. Words like authoritarianism, or totalitarianism, or dictatorial rule, or colonizing are more modern expressions of the impulse for one group to build a name for itself. And that impulse is alive and well.

Currently our Anti-Racism team is leading an adult study on Christian Nationalism. If it is not on your radar, it should be. It is an expression of the tower building lust for power and control, privileging one group over all others, and claiming the right to define what is right and true for all. This is done by suppressing dissenting voices, banning books, demonizing those who are different, violence, and controlling the narratives that guide our collective lives. People are attracted to it because it seems so efficient. They want leaders who can get things done and put down perceived threats to the power and control of the privileged group. Christian nationalism is particularly deceptive because it coopts the language of our faith and makes claims as to what is the one true expression of what it means to be Christian. It perpetuates the idea that we are a Christian Nation and need to use whatever means possible to eliminate threats to this identity, even if it means subverting constitutional democracy. Christian Nationalism is a form of the tower building totalitarianism described in Genesis.

In some churches and religious institutions, individuals are required to subscribe to an established set of beliefs and not allowed to question the authority of those in leadership. There is a push toward uniformity, all speaking the same language, which gives the institution a louder voice in the community and greater power over those who willingly subscribe. In return, members have a certitude that is comforting. They have a sense of belonging. The boundaries are clear. And woe to those who don't subscribe. They are condemned, ostracized, denied full membership, labeled as troublemakers, and exiled. This kind of authoritarian structure is a form of the tower building concentrators of power in Genesis.

We even see this impulse enacted in families with a strict hierarchy. If you want an eye-opening experience watch the three-part series on the Dugger family called, "Shiny Happy People." On

the surface the obedience and manners of their children appear extraordinary, then you learn about the punishment and submission that makes it so and how it creates a climate for sexual abuse. On a small scale this expression of toxic patriarchy is an example of Babel and authoritarianism.

The story of the tower of Babel reflects this impulse to concentrate power in the hands of a few or one, motivated by the desire to build a name for oneself. For those who hold power, the issue is bigger than pride. It is narcissism on a grand scale. The seductive thing about it is that it is often presented as a means to serve a greater good.

The funny thing about this story is that it very clearly says God has to come down to scatter them. So much for their futile attempt to reach the heavens, they are not even close. Nope, God comes down to them. And God disperses them and scatters them.

We hear echoes of this theme in the song Mary sings while pregnant with Jesus. She sings:

⁵¹ God has shown strength with God's arm;

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ God has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of God's mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:51-55)

It is no coincidence that the story of the Tower of Babel takes place right before the call of Abraham. The call of Abraham is where God calls a people, not to dominate or to rule over others, but to be a blessing to all nations.

It's also no coincidence that the people hearing this story are in the process of reclaiming their identity as God's people and in the process of rebuilding their nation. Remember the words we read last week from Isaiah 58, God is not interested in creating yet another totalitarian regime, where violence, intimidation, and oppression serve the needs of those with all the power. God wants a kingdom that blesses all people.

And the oneness and unity of God's kingdom does not happen by forcing people to conform. There are two kinds of unity. One kind of unity is based upon uniformity where everyone is expected to conform to whatever is established by those in power.

The second kind of unity is unity around purpose. When people come together around a purpose, different and dissenting voices are welcomed as additional resources to serve the purpose. Diversity enriches the effort, and it is understood there are different ways of achieving that purpose, and people are empowered rather than disempowered.

It is not uncommon for the story of the Tower of Babel to be read on Pentecost Sunday as a kind of cautionary tale. And then as we read the story of the spirit descending upon the early church at Pentecost we see the kind of unity God desires; a unity grounded in the kingdom of God as our purpose. Acts 2 describes a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic gathering with a cacophony of languages, empowered to be messengers of the kingdom of God.

And as these spirit-filled people scattered and went back to their homes, they took with them the kingdom of God. Every community was different, but their mission was shared – to take love, forgiveness, compassion, and justice to the ends of the earth. And that is still our mission today – not to make a name for ourselves, not to exercise power and control over others, not to make others conform, not to make everyone our definition of Christian, but to live the kingdom way.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we call it unity with diversity. It's not efficient and it can be messy. We are challenged to listen to one another, respect one another, love one another and challenge one another as we strive to follow the kingdom way of Jesus.

And rather than building towers, we gather week after week at a level place, called the table. It is there that we remember who we are and the purpose that unites us.

May the story of the Tower of Babel help us to recognize this tower building impulse around us. May the table be, for us, our strength, our hope, and our vision. Amen.