



The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

Every year on Christmas Eve and the Sunday that follows, we faithfully read the Christmas account as it is presented to us in Matthew and Luke. Every Easter, we will read at least one of the accounts of the Resurrection; and the Sundays following we will continue to read the stories of Jesus' appearances to his disciples. And today we read the account of Pentecost, just like we do every year. There are several Christian holidays, but of course the big three are Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

I give thanks that unlike Christmas and Easter, no one has figured out how to make a profit by exploiting Pentecost. I bet no one of you received a \$5.00 Hallmark Pentecost card that reads: "Wishing you a special blessing of the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost Day." There are no turkeys to be sliced, potatoes to mash, or a cake with a flaming tongue decorated on top. No one has thought of something as creative as producing chocolate doves to sell in the grocery store, like the store in our community that sold chocolate Easter crosses. I really cannot think of anything more distasteful than to sell a chocolate cross.

Well Christmas is a distant memory, and yesterday we moved from the season of Easter and Ascension, and today is Pentecost. The text I read earlier from Acts 2 is not the only account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church. You may remember the disciples gathered in a room and Jesus made an appearance, and breathed upon them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Today's text may, at least at first, seem a little odd for a Pentecost reading. It is the story found in Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel. There is the link of languages in the Tower of Babel story and the Pentecost account. At Pentecost people came from all around speaking different languages, and the Holy Spirit overcame the differences in language as the disciples began to speak about the glory of God in all the languages of the people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Where did all those languages come from? Well, that is the link to Tower of Babel that represents a time when everyone spoke the same language and God confused the languages.

Hear God's word as I read 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 burn 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.

When we begin our lives, we are given a script that defines for us what we are supposed to do to be safe and happy. For a boy reared in Texas, the script went something like this: Get plenty of exercise, don't do drugs, avoid strangers, do your homework and work hard in school, go to college and get a degree, avoid people who are different, especially if they are of another language or culture, cheer for the Texas Rangers, and above all make a lot of money so we can continue supporting the forces of consumerism, militarism and extreme individualism. I mean, if you cannot do it for yourself, then you are weak and worthless. But if you keep to the script then you will be happy and safe. And then what happens to the Christian, I mean the person who takes his or her faith seriously? The Holy Spirit comes upon them and blows our way of life all to pieces.

We come face to face with God and the mysterious odd world of Scripture changes the script. And we find that this Biblical script, this Christ-centered script, is not safe, but it is life giving, and with it comes great joy.

I think this has something to do with the Tower of Babel, but I am getting ahead of myself, so let's begin with an introduction of the text. The story of Babel is the final of four stories of what may be called Israel's prehistory. The first is the story of human disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The second is the murder of a brother; you remember Cain and Able. The third tells us of the rebellion of

humans and the coming of God's judgment in the form of a great flood. And today we will be looking at the confusion of languages.

From the beginning humans have not lived in ways that give glory to God. We are far from what it means to be created in the image of God. And these stories of disobedience from Adam and Eve to the people living in Noah's day set up the text that tells about a time when there was only one language. It was the language spoken by a people who desperately wanted to hold on to the simplicity that comes from uniformity, and whose desire it is to gain control of the unknown future. It is actually a story of frightened people, desperately afraid of change.

Now from my Sunday school years, I was taught that the reason behind building a tower that stretched to heaven was to be a symbol of human achievement and power – a symbol of human pride, and God was not happy with this change in focus from God's ways to a focus and worship of human achievement. So God intervened by confusing the language of the people, for if they could no longer communicate they would be humbled. It was also told to me that this story is the explanation of why there are so many different languages in the world today.

When I am confused by an Old Testament text, it is helpful to consult the scholars, and Walter Brueggemann is perhaps the most renowned Reformed Old Testament scholar in the world today. Brueggemann suggests that the account of the Tower of Babel is not so much about pride and separation of languages, but a story of unbridled fear.

What were they afraid of? There is a hint in the text. The people say, **"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."** They were afraid of being scattered. They were afraid of the mandate given to Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth. They wanted their city, they wanted recognition, so they thought, "Let's make a name for ourselves by building this tower, for if we don't we will be scattered, and who knows what is out there in the unknown where we may be scattered?" In other words, "We know everybody, we are all the same, we have the same language," and the result of this, as proven in the Garden of Eve, Cain and Able and the flood, is disobedience. God said, **"This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them."** Oh, they will never be God. They will never achieve almighty, but they will self-perpetuate their own prejudices into their own little world of sameness in their one great city.

I understand the fear of strange places and the fear of what the future holds, and if we can only keep things the same and not be scattered, all will be well. We fear the unknown. We fear those who are not like us. The fear pops up in the politics that surrounds immigration policy and partisan speeches about job loss. We can't sleep at night as we worry about what is going to happen to us. It feels like life is out of control.

In Shinar they built a tower to keep from being scattered, to stay in control, for that is what happens when we get scared and our anxiety runs amok. We batten down the hatches, huddle together with people we like and who are like us, and build whatever we can – physically, emotionally, spiritually—to keep out the chaos and make us feel safe and in control. When faced with diversification, we stop trusting God and work hard to make a name for ourselves and secure a future for ourselves and people like us. And what a surprise it is going to be when God confuses our language and we are forced to diversify, and to love and accept those who are different.

The late Bernhard Anderson, professor of Old Testament at Princeton University wrote concerning this text: "There is something very human in this portrayal of a people who attempted to preserve unity. It is that dimension of life that underlies human conflicts: fear of geographical dispersion, fear of linguistic and ethnic diversity, fear of differences of race, religion, custom. However," Anderson continues, "their intention to hold on to the simplicity of the primeval past, the good old days, we might say directly collided with the purpose of God, who acted intentionally to disperse them from their chosen center—their tower." God did not say, band together in one great city, but "**multiply and fill the earth.**" So God confused their languages and scattered the people.

I wonder what the people did that was so wrong. They built a great city with the tallest tower in the world, so they could just stay together. What is wrong with all the togetherness? They could build a wall, ramparts, and pass laws to keep everything and everybody the same. What is wrong with that? Don't scatter us. We like things the same. We like folks like ourselves. And above all we will be safe and happy, loving each other around our tower. Is that not the script or the rules to success and happiness we are taught?

But as Walter Brueggemann reminds us, this is not God's script. God's commission was to "**Go, multiply, and fill the earth.**" Don't concentrate on just one place. God's script is to have the courage and faith to follow God and place our fears of the unknown in God's hands. Genesis reminds us that God's desire

was never for all humankind to share the same life experiences, to speak the same language, to be mirrors of one another. So in an act of grace, which seems like judgment to us, but in God's grace, he scattered the people, God made the people face their fears, then they could multiply and fill the earth.

As Shannon Kershner, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago wrote, "In this story, though humankind strove to maintain a simple uniformity, God's actions affected complex diversity. Though humankind sought to maintain a center, God countered that desire with dispersion. Though humankind wanted to keep itself safe with homogeneity, God welcomed nothing less than pluralism. We see in both this story and also in the traditional Pentecost story from Acts 2 that only a cacophony of languages, a diversity of skin colors and cultural identities, a full complement of abilities and disabilities will do for our God. Anything less than embracing and celebrating the complexity of difference in our families, in our churches, in our nation, and in our world—anything other than living with an open-armed posture—falls short of living out God's hope for creation. It falls short of embodying God's alternative script for our lives that leads to salvation and wholeness and life."

In the story of God confusing the languages it becomes clear that God's script is much different than ours. God's way does not come easy in our world. Kershner wrote, "We live in a world that uses a different script. It is easy to see strangers or those with whom we disagree as enemies. It is easy to be threatened by others whose political or theological views are opposed to ours. It is easy to concentrate only on a sense of disempowerment, loss, or anger in a world that feels like it left you behind. It is always easier to selfishly turn on each other or away from each other, rather than toward each other.

"These ways of reaching out to secure our little world fit nicely within that script that shapes so much of what we see, hear, and say these days; yet as easy as those ways of being might feel, they are not a faithful response for us who identify with Christ. Quickly typecasting another as enemy; letting strong differences of opinion tear apart families, friendships, and churches; going through each day angry or completely cynical—none of these responses, none of these ways of being, are based on our true script, God's script, the script of God did not create us to live fueled by fear or anxiety. God did not create us to live focused on maintaining sameness at any cost."

It is clear from this story in Genesis, as well as from the New Testament, that God created us to live with an open-armed posture, a posture that sees

difference and complexity as divine gifts. Remember at Shinar it was God who scattered the people into different languages and cultures. It is God who creates the rich diversity that fills the earth. It was God who said, **“Be fruitful and multiply and fill and earth.”** And our Old Testament ancestors said, we will have nothing to do with God’s ways. Let’s build a city with a great tower and make a name for ourselves, so we will not be scattered.

Though there is nothing easy about living in that open-postured way, especially when we live surrounded by a dominant script that teaches us just the opposite, but it is how God calls us to live. From the tower of Babel, God has desired for us to see diverse complexity as a gift, as a means for human flourishing, central to God’s script of life, and of salvation.

This story of Genesis 11 is odd and has little of the flair of account of Pentecost found in Acts 2. But I pray that we will learn from our ancestors who built a tower in Shinar. And following God’s way, may we choose to have the courage to follow God and receive with open arms all the good things that God brings into our world and into our lives. For that is who we are. So come, Holy Spirit, come upon us and make us God’s people who live in and love the wonderful diversity God has created. And in this world, living through the power of God’s Spirit, may we be faithful witnesses of the Love of Jesus Christ, for that is the one thing that is always the same. Amen.