

“Just Babeling On”

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

William C. Pender

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The first book of the Bible, Genesis, is named for “beginnings”—that is the root meaning of the word “genesis.” And so there are multiple beginnings: The creation—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...;” the beginning of rebellion—the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, violence—Cain murdering his brother Abel, the origin rainbow—Noah and the ark, following the Flood. The story that I am about to read is often read as the beginning of language...but it has so much more.

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.

I am going to read one more beginning story, the origin of this day we call Pentecost Sunday. This is the beginning story of the church, as the followers of Jesus following his resurrection await what is to come next. Jesus has told them that they will be scattered...to be witnesses in the world. But Jesus says, “Wait for the Spirit to move you.”

So on the Jewish harvest festival called Pentecost, we have this account from the book of Acts where the followers of Jesus are gathered in Jerusalem:

Acts 2:1-11: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and

visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Years ago an American tourist and church-goer went the city of Basel, Switzerland. He was not your average church member in that one of his heroes was the great theologian of the 20th century: Karl Barth. Basel was Karl Barth’s home. So, this tourist took the local street car out to the neighborhood where Karl Barth lived. In the street car, the American tourist sat down by another Swiss man, who it turns out could speak English. The tourist said, “You don’t happen to know Karl Barth?” The man, who it turns out was Karl Barth, simply said, “I shave his face each day.” The American tourist was overjoyed and, when he returned to the States, he told everyone: “I met Karl Barth’s barber!”...never realizing that he met Karl Barth.

One stopping point in this great Biblical story of the Tower of Babel and the construction of the great city around it is that we think it is simply a story of the origin of languages. And if we stop there, we are like the tourist that met Karl Barth’s barber...when what is more significant lies undiscovered right before us.

No, this is a story about the two-fold dilemma of humanity. First, how human self-reliance interferes with our relationship with God...how our “I’d rather do it myself” blocks our faith...how we confuse where we get our identity. And second, how fear controls us. How anxiety takes over and we miss what God intends. You see, this an “everyman story” or “everywoman story”—the first chapters of the book of Genesis give us a Biblical understanding of what it means to be human.

Now, stay with me on this one, remember the Hebrew way to talk about our nature, our identity, our being is not to be philosophical, or logical, or form an argument with points. The Hebrew way is to tell a story. So, look again at the details of the story. Here at Babel, human beings seek to make a name for themselves. They stop and build, when the design of Creator God was that they spread out and fill the world. That is what the Creator God says at the conclusion of the creation...and following the devastation of the flood: fill the earth.

So picture a two year old playing with Legos and being told it is time to go to bed. There is the two-year-old’s concentration on building but the parent’s focus on it is time for bed. And with most two-year-olds, they have learned that power word: “No.” No, I am going to stay right here and build my tower. The intention of God in creation as declared in Genesis is that the human race to fill the earth. Here humanity says: No, I have my own agenda...my own intention...my own purpose.

This story is more profound than just speaking of rebellion...it also speaks of fear. Not only do the builders seek to make a name for themselves, they also are fearful...fearful of being scattered; fearful of being lost and disconnected. Better the trouble we know than the unknown beyond this point. They build in order to hang on rather than to accept God’s gracious good will to spread and live the diversity that God intended.

Again take that two-year old and imagine a child with a splinter. To remove the splinter will require some painful probing but it will be better in the long-run. But what does the two-year old fear: the probing. So leave the splinter alone. The thought of the long-term good is banished by the fear and

anxiety: don't risk anything. Stay put, build a tower and city, keep the status-quo in order to live with the anxiety and fear rather than accept God's plan for diversity.

And so this tale further confronts our rebellion and fear in very simple way...by telling us about the building materials of the city and of the tower. The story says that they used bricks instead stones and bitumen (or tar) instead of mortar. An off-hand sort of comment until you consider the subtext of this statement: bricks are human-made...stones are a gift of God, part of nature; bitumen or tar is a gift of God, or of nature, and mortar is human made. The question here is proportionality. The building of this city and tower requires a lot of bricks with a little tar in the joints. How much of the building material is of God and how much is human making? Very little. A stone structure with mortars in the joints: how much of the building materials is of God and how much of human making? It is about God...with a little human ingenuity in the cracks!

Even that little detail subverts the misguided purposes of humanity. The city and the tower are an expression of rebellion: "I'll do it my way." The city and the tower are expressions of anxiety, "Don't make a change," even if the change will hold out the possibility of a better future. So what's the Creator God to do? God's "terrible two's" are building a tower and they do not understand what is best for them. What's a Creator to do?

Kelly Fryer, an author and church consultant, tells of a time in seminary when she was listening to an uninteresting lecture on a beautiful day when everyone would rather be outside. Apparently the professor sensed that nobody was being attentive because suddenly he closed his notebook and stopped talking. "He wasn't going to waste one more breath on us," she writes. But, before leaving the lecture hall, he picked up a piece of chalk and on the blackboard he drew a huge arrow pointing straight down. He stood back and told the class, "If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian ..." and with that he left the room.

Everyone remained for a time staring at the arrow pointing downward. Fryer admits that the most logical thing she could think was, "*He thinks we're all going to hell.*"

But the next time the class met the professor began his lecture by drawing that same arrow on the board. This time he had everyone's complete attention. "Here's what this means," he told them. "God *always* comes down. God always comes down. There is never *anything* that we can do to turn that arrow around and make our way UP to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down, in the bread and in the wine, in the water and in the fellowship of believers. God ALWAYS comes down."¹

God comes down even at Babel. Does God come down on that Tower of Babel like an airplane crashing into a great tower, to bring it down? That's one way to get the attention of people who are not paying much attention, isn't it? No, God's way is more subtle, more enduring, more full of grace than a September 11 type of intervention. God's way is rarely about crises that force such attention. No, here there is the gift of language to fulfill God's purpose for humanity to spread out, take up their differences, live out the diversity that God created.

¹ Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the "L" Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 25-26, as quoted at http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000333

So, there in city of Babel and at the tower, one worker will say: “Give me another brick.” And the other worker will say, “Como? Que dijiste.” The first worker will say to a third party, “Did you understand what he just said?” And that worker will say: “Was sagst du? Ich kann dich nicht verstehen!” And so on. Humanity spreads, taking up the diversity of language, the diversity of ethnicity, the beauty of human beings made in the image of God.

God comes down...God keeps coming down. That other beginning story for today—what happens on the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, after that first Easter—God comes down. On the surface, this a reversal of Babel, but the differences among God’s beloved human family are not erased. The story still has that tongue-twisting listing of races and language-groups: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” What unites these people is not city or a tower...not an ethnicity or a language...not a country...not a college...not a sport...not even a family. What unites them is that they hear God being praised, each in their own language...each in their own God-given diversity.

On this Memorial Day weekend, where we give thanks for those who have served and given their lives in service for this great nation, I want to recall for you one of the great dreams of this country...a dream that connects with a faith dream of the church of Jesus Christ. One of the great dreams of America is that we are diverse people: we are Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Japanese-Americans, German-Americans, Hawaiian-Americans, Native-Americans. The diversity does not disappear...does not melt away...does not get smoothed out. But we are united in something larger than family, greater than ethnicity, bigger than ourselves: Anglo, African, Italian, Irish, Brazilian...Americans. Memorial Day for me is not so much about remembering how there have been those who sacrificed to save the tower or preserve the walled city we call America. No, the greater dream and vision is of a society of peoples in all their diversity.

Here is the word of challenge for Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church, with our Anglo-American foundation: are we building a tower and city that keeps one language and makes a name for ourselves...or are we to listen to the God who comes down and call us to dream dreams? Here is a word of challenge for each us this week: are we building a city and tower of our own bricks...to hold on to what we have rather than listening to God’s call to seek out what is different, even more difficult, but what has God called to do? God comes down, even in those events that seem to disconnect...scatter...but which set us loose to serve God. God keeps coming down.