

Sermon: “Beyond Babel”

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Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 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. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.

Genesis 11:1-9

Once upon a time, there was a flood.

- A. This flood, according to the author of Genesis, destroyed “everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life” (Gen. 7:22). Everyone and everything died—except for one little family, tucked away safely in an ark, and a few non-human creatures they managed to bring along with them.
 - a. When the waters subsided and the survivors left the ark, the earth did not look the same as it did before. If you’ve ever seen before and after pictures of an area that has experienced flooding, you know floodwaters can drastically change a landscape.
 - b. Familiar landmarks were erased. Trusted sites for planting crops and feeding animals could no longer be found. The world which this family once knew no longer existed.
 - c. So as this family slowly grew and spread across the ruined landscape, they were also searching; searching for a place to call home.

And then, it happened.

- B. As they made their way through the land of Shinar, they stumbled across a valley they had never seen before.

- a. The soil in the valley was rich, nourished by two great rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates. It was filled with resources they could use to build homes and craft tools. The valley itself offered natural protection from the elements.
- b. Suddenly, there was no need to keep searching. Everything they could ever want was right in front of them. It was a chance at a new beginning.
- c. So they settled there. Their settlement became a village, then a town, and then, finally, a city. And at the center of that city, they set themselves to the task of building something no one had ever built before: a tower, with its top in the heavens.

Why build such a tower?

- C. If you've heard this story before, you may have heard that it was an act of rebellion against God; an attempt to encroach upon God's domain in the heavens and eventually overthrow God. Maybe you've heard that the tower of Babel was built as a monument to human greatness.
 - a. While that may be possible, I suspect something else was going on.
 - b. If you have the patience to comb through the genealogy of Noah's descendants in Genesis 10, you'll pick up on an interesting tidbit of information. The first king of Babel was a man named Nimrod. Nimrod, son of Cush, son of Ham, son of ... Noah. Babel comes just three generations after the flood.
 - c. And while that might seem like quite a gap, consider how, for example, our own family stories—even those from generations past—shape the way we see the world; what we love, what we hate, what we fear. In fact, recent studies in epigenetics are revealing that the physiological impacts of trauma might literally be passed down biologically from generation to generation.¹
 - d. The memory of the flood is fresh for the people of Babel. They are carrying it in their bodies.

Now, in the wake of the flood, God did promise that no such destruction would come again. And God also reiterated the instructions God had given Adam and Eve in the garden—to go forth, multiply, and fill the earth.

- D. These instructions were meant for their good.
 - a. God's plan was always to fill the earth with different and diverse peoples. God's plan was always for humanity to have different cultures, languages, beliefs, skin colors, sexualities, abilities, and more.

- b. But I imagine that to the people of Babel, these instructions did not sound like good news. I imagine that they sounded like they were being forced to abandon the one thing that they had been able to rely on in the wake of the flood—each other.
- c. So perhaps these wanderers are not proud. Perhaps they are not rebels. Perhaps they are simply afraid.
- d. And driven by that fear, the people of Babel decide that rather than trusting God, they will trust in the work of their own hands. They try to build something that will be impervious to the forces of chaos swirling around them. One language, one city, one *family*, forever.

All of a sudden, this myth starts to seem a little more real.

- E. After all, we know something of what it means to live in a chaotic world.
 - a. The list is all too familiar at this point: pandemic, political turmoil, endless war, climate change. Not to mention the chaos that doesn't make the news; the kind that happens in our families, our homes, our bodies, our souls.
 - b. In a world as unstable and unpredictable as ours, what we want—more than anything—is Babel. We are desperate for certainty and stability. We want to build things that bring the world under our control; towers with their tops in the heavens.
 - c. Throughout our nation's history, we have seen this impulse play out to horrible and destructive ends. Systems of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy and racial capitalism form the bedrock of this country, each of them built for the sake of bringing the world under the control of a privileged few.
 - d. We are watching people try to build Babel right now, as a wave of new laws and policies criminalize teaching children the truth about our nation's history and deny trans folks access to gender-affirming healthcare. Unfortunately, these racist and queer-phobic dogwhistles are effective tools for politicians who are interested in maintaining power and control.

But Babel is not just something that exists *out there.* It is not just something that “those people” are building.

- F. I have a running joke with some of my close friends from college that my plan for the future is to buy all of the houses on a cul-de-sac so we can be together forever. (In reality, the dream is actually to buy one house, like on Full House, but I'll compromise.)

- a. But the truth in that joke is that I'm terrified of the unknown. I dream of that cul-de-sac because it means I'll never have to wonder where I'm going to live, who my friends will be, how my kids will grow up, where I will die.
- b. And while I have not yet bought up all the houses on a cul-de-sac (and likely never will, because interest rates are insane and I make pastor money), when I look into my soul, I know that the impulse to build Babel—to seize control of my story, to trust myself rather than God—lives inside of me.
- c. For me, Babel looks like chasing expertise in everything so I am never surprised by anything. (And in case anyone out there is into the Enneagram, I am a 5, so that tracks.)
- d. For you, Babel might look like a carefully curated circle of friends who look and think and talk like you. It might look like doing everything you can to avoid vulnerability in your relationships.
- e. It might look like impulsive spending after every paycheck or a meticulously managed retirement account.
- f. It might look like unhealthy eating habits, or refusing to go to therapy, or saying “Yes” to every opportunity that comes our way because we are afraid there will never be another.

Babel comes in so many tantalizing forms. And it is great at giving us what we want—control—but it never gives us what we truly need.

G. What we *need* is abundant life.

- a. What we *need* is a life animated by the transformative and creative Spirit of God. What we need is a life beyond Babel, where we are led by God's Spirit into wonder and mystery and—yes—a little bit of chaos.
- b. This is why when Pastor Jessica asked if I would preach here on Pentecost Sunday, I jumped at the chance. I love to tell the story of Babel alongside the story of the day of Pentecost from the book of Acts, because Pentecost is all about the chaos.
- c. I should say here that these two stories mirror each other in several ways.
 - i. Both stories are catalyzed by a world-changing, paradigm-shifting event; in Genesis, it's the flood, and in Acts, it's the resurrection.
 - ii. Both stories see groups of people grappling with whether to trust God's promises. Both stories end with people scattering and speaking in multiple languages.

- iii. It's no accident that the lectionary pairs these stories together. Some scholars even think the author of Acts has the story of Babel in mind as they are shaping their account of the day of Pentecost.

But the real reason I love telling these two stories together is because it helps us see what is possible when we are willing to give up control.

H. Let me say it again: The day of Pentecost is all about chaos.

- a. I think we miss how chaotic it was because it's in the Bible, and the Bible is boring, right? But Pentecost was completely out of control!
- b. 120 people in a house. Already a recipe for disaster. Then, a mighty wind starts rushing through, and fire appears above everyone's heads. I don't know if you know this, but fire and wind are generally not a good combination.
- c. Then people start speaking in languages they've never learned before. Now we have rushing wind, tongues of fire, and chaotic shouting in other languages. If this was a movie, we would think they were trying to summon a demon. Pure and utter chaos!
- d. But God is a God who knows how to bring beauty out of chaos. From the very beginning of creation, God has been working in, through, and with chaos. Chaos is no obstacle for God!
- e. And look at what God makes out of the chaos on Pentecost. Three thousand people joined the Jesus movement that day. The church was born. We are here as heirs of the legacy of this day; a day when God's people were willing to trust what God was doing, even when things got a bit out of their control.

When God saw what the people of Babel had built, God saw it for what it truly was: a shrine to the little-g god of control.

- I. And so God scattered them, sending them out with new tongues to spread out across the world.
 - a. In other words, God turned God's people toward new life by turning them toward the thing they were most afraid of: uncertainty.
 - b. I wonder if today, God wants to turn us in the same direction. Because where we see uncertainty, God sees opportunities for new life.
 - c. And we do not have to wait for God to descend from on high or for wind and tongues of fire. The Spirit of God is within each of us. And that means that no matter what kind of Babel we have

built, God is closer than our very breath, waiting for us to trust in her. Right now, God is reaching out God's hand, inviting us to leave Babel behind.

- d. Beyond Babel lies a horizon of promise that is offered to us by grace and is guaranteed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It's a promise that is summed up by that well-worn encouragement that it is God who goes before us and God will never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:6-8; Heb. 13:5). It's a promise that is—as Paul says in Ephesians—“exceedingly and abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20). I want that promise. Don't you?
- e. Friends, I may not know what Babel you have built. And I may not know what it will take for you to leave it. But I do know this: God knows the way out.

Will you follow?

Amen.

Note

1 New avenues in epigenetic research about race: Online activism around reparations for slavery in the United States - Élodie Grossi, 2020.