

From Babel to Praise

Genesis 11: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
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Like the story of Noah and the ark, the Tower of Babel is a story I've loved since childhood. I loved towers of every kind, especially church spires and castles. So I was fascinated with the tower itself. I wanted to explore in there. Our Bible story books and Sunday school material had pictures like Erich Lessing's painting from 1563.



Half built, rising into the clouds, the tower's passageways invite little boys to come and explore. Who can resist the lure of castle ruins? Surely inside there are monsters and enemies to fight, maidens to be rescued and glory to be won.

You won't be surprised, then, that one of my favorite parts of going to the beach is making sand castles. I love to cap my towers with dripping sands that sends the spire ever higher.



Secret and wondrous things go on inside such structures.

Archaeologists have discovered that in ancient Babylon there was indeed a tower, called a ziggurat, more than 300 feet high. It looked something like this:



Imagine that structure before the winds of the centuries wore it down.

The problem with the Tower of Babel, of course, was not with the structure itself, but with the purpose of the builders. The text tells us why they began construction. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11: 4).

When Noah and his family left the ark, the LORD repeated to them their purpose from creation as God’s image-bearers: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9: 1). But as our story opens, people decided to stop spreading out and to gather in a city. The world was wide and there was fear of being scattered like seed on the winds. But there was more than fear going on as well. There was *pride*. Come let us build a tower, tall enough to reach the heavens. We will make a name for ourselves. This is the collective spirit of man in rebellion against God.

The LORD declares his name to be “I AM.” The human reply is “No, *I am!*” I am the center. I am the goal. I can make my life secure against the future. I can make my life safe from God. The Freedom from Religion society did not begin in the 20th century. It has resided in the human heart since the fall. If we can make meaning and security in life then we do not need to refer life to God. We are on our own in the world so let’s band together and make human society sufficient to meet the yearnings of the human heart. Our technology can do this. It can eliminate the need for a higher power. Our technology can eventually remove the old enemies of disease and death. Our technology can bridge all loneliness.

It’s hard to resist quoting Dr. Phil at this point: How’s that working out for you?

- The technology of birth control promised to vault us past the need for restraint in sexual relationships. We could be fulfilled connecting however we want. Has that worked? Do we see more harmony or chaos in relationships? Are children better or worse off?
- The technology of the internet holds such promise to connect us to each other anytime, anywhere. We message all the time, yet loneliness is epidemic.
- Fame promises the satisfaction of glory. Yet we watch politicians and celebrities rise, crash and burn, going from fame to infamy at alarming speed.
- Art promises to carry the projection of human meaning. We devote ourselves to gazing at our own creations. Many of them are quite dazzling in the discipline of dancing, the power of the voice in singing and acting, the

subtlety of colors in painting. Yet if they have no higher referent, artistic endeavors always fall back into a pool of self-absorption.

- We have more stuff than any people who ever lived and yet we are empty, spiritually hungry, and medicating ourselves to cover it.
- We travel with speed and ease across the globe but we cannot arrive at peace.

Isaiah the prophet described us this way,
You were wearied with the length of your way,
But you did not say, “It is hopeless”;
You found new life for your strength,
And so you were not faint. (Is. 57: 10).

I like the way a contemporary version puts it:

Though you tired yourself out
by running after idols,
you refused to stop.
Your desires were so strong
that they kept you going.

The people of Babel were determined. They worked hard to create a self-salvation system. They made bricks and mortar. They worked under the sun. They slaved away to make a tower that would give them a name and protect them from the wildness of the world. Though they exhausted themselves in pursuit of being their own gods, they would not quit. They kept rallying to the vision of a free and independent humanity.

The way the story is told in Genesis 11, the whole account turns on a little hinge. Verse 5: The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. The LORD came down. We mustn't miss the irony here.

We have a number of large, thriving Presbyterian churches in Denver.



We've had General Assembly in the Mile High city several times. I love Denver as a city. Downtown is vibrant. But I'm always struck by a contrast when I fly out of Denver. Inside the city, it seems huge. The buildings

are tall and the city sprawls. But as you ascend and see the city against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, it starts to look tinier and tinier. All the great works of man diminish as the plane rises and you see the stunning majesty of God's mountains. Eventually, Denver's just a dot against the snow-capped peaks. So, too the great Tower of Babel might have looked mighty from the ground. But from heaven, it was less than a speck. The LORD had to come down, he had to stoop and squint just to see this little house of cards that was the pride of man.

Of course, the puniness of our physical strength does not make our rebellion against God any less lethal. The sweet, creamy-cheeked, golden-tressed 17 year old on the volleyball court can have a heart just as fiercely, wickedly bent as the 250 pound tattooed thug at the dive bar. A respectable accountant in Bocage can careen into hell just as surely as a raving jihadist constructing bombs. The cry "I Am and I need no other" can be uttered in a cultured, compelling velvet voice. But that only makes it deadlier than the harsh cries of open defiance.

The good news is that God loves us so much he will not let us get away with pride and self-assertion forever. We have a limited life span. We have limited strength. Within a hundred years, even the strongest of us come to an end. Even the mightiest empires crumble. They rot from within if enemies do not overrun them.

But more, God has built us in such a way that our substitutes for him will never satisfy us. We can flaunt his laws, but we will never find the peace we crave. We can make our defiant decisions about relationships, but we will never find the fulfillment we seek apart from God. We can surround ourselves with distractions, shiny trinkets and fascinating technology but we will not find satisfaction apart from putting God first.

As Augustine so famously said, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." This opening chapter of Augustine's *Confessions* is the antidote to the hubris of Babel:

Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Your creation, desires to praise You, man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even the witness that You resist the proud, — yet man, this part of Your creation, desires to praise You. You move us to delight in praising You; for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You.

But Oh! How shall I find rest in You? Who will send You into my heart to inebriate it, so that I may forget my woes, and embrace You my only good? Tell me of Your compassion, O Lord my God, what You are to me. Say unto my soul, I am your salvation. Cramped is the dwelling of my soul; expand it, that You may enter in. It is in ruins, restore it. So speak that I may hear.

In his severe mercy, the LORD confused the language of the people, so that the place of the tower came to be known as “Babel,” a word which means what it sounds like: confusion, nonsense. He dispersed the people into the world. They scattered in confusion, fear, and loneliness. The new history of the world was not going well.

In the book of Acts, we read of the final antidote to the scene at Babel. Jesus is the Son of God made flesh and blood. He came to show us his Father’s love for his lost creation and to enact love and faithfulness to his Father from within our lost world. We rejected him, nailing him to the cross. Humanity tried to dispense with the Son of God in our midst. We tried to silence the one who as the Son of God said, “I Am.” We buried him, getting Jesus out of the way. But the Father received his sacrifice of love and fidelity. He declared Jesus “Not Guilty” and raised him from the dead. Forty days later, Jesus ascended up to heaven. Here was man remade. A man, still in flesh and blood, skin and bone, was outfitted now for a life of communion with God in the eternal realms. Jesus went up, exalting our humanity to the very right hand of the throne of God. He ascended higher than any tower man could make. He ascended beyond the realm of space and time to the very presence of his Father. There he reigns. There he intercedes in our name and on our behalf. From there he will come again to set all things right.

And from heaven, Jesus, as man ascended in glory, looks down on his disciples. Instead of scattering them, he sends his Spirit upon them to draw the world together. At the time of the festival of Pentecost, people from every nation had gathered in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind and the sight of tongues of fire dancing over their heads. The Spirit opened their mouths to speak praises to God. They did so in all the languages represented at the feast. They praised the Lord Jesus in tongues people from every land could understand. So a crowd of thousands rushed together. Peter proclaimed the gospel of forgiveness and new life through Christ. Three thousand believed and were baptized. They too received the Holy Spirit. It is no wonder that immediately afterward we read how the new community of people located in Christ by the Spirit shared everything. They went from “I” to “Christ in us.” They

found a oneness and fulfillment that cut across all cultures and languages of the world.

Five hundred years ago, the church of Jesus Christ in Europe had many signs of being a Tower of Babel. Many of the leaders called to be consecrated to Christ had given themselves to enormous worldly power and riches—their faith got comprised. Bricks and mortar of human ideas had been laid over the gospel. Salvation systems were devised which enriched the church and hid the truth of free justification by faith from the people. The church had one language, Latin, but that kept the Bible from being read or understood by all but the few.

The Protestant revolution scattered that proud tower. People began to read the Word of God in languages they could understand. Remarkably, reading Scripture in multiple languages created a unity of faith across nations. The entire culture of Western Europe was changed and eventually, even the Roman church made needed Reforms. Today, people of historic Christian faith are uniting over essentials, even as we realize the world around us is increasingly hostile. Across the globe, the love of Christ is the answer to the hatred of others, the Scriptures are the life-freeing, ennobling power even amidst economic poverty and political oppression. The story of Jesus gets told in more and more languages, uniting believers with a bond that transcends every other distinction.

The gospel still works. We are still called to turn aside from building towers of self, structures of false security that mask our fear and exalt our sense of independence. We are called to exalt the one man rightly exalted to heaven: Jesus Christ the righteous, in whom is all our hope.