

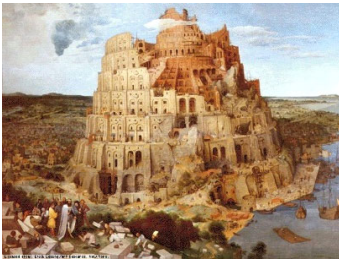
Tongues Untied

Genesis 11:1-9

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana
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Today is Pentecost Sunday. It's the last major episode in the retelling of the life of Jesus every year. Pentecost was a spring harvest festival in Jerusalem. Pilgrims from all over the known world gathered for the week long celebration. Fifty days after Easter, at the beginning of Pentecost, the ascended Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his gathered disciples. A mighty wind rushed through the room. Tongues as of fire danced over their heads. A crowd gathered to see what was going on. And the Lord's people began to praise him for his mighty works of salvation. The kicker is that these disciples from Galilee spoke their praises in all the languages of the people who had come from many nations. Everyone heard the praises in his own language. Thus began the age of the church and our mission to bring the gospel of Jesus to all people. So you could say that today is the birthday celebration of the church. But a better focus is on gratitude for the present we were given that day: the *gift* of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and the privilege of being given a *share* in Jesus' mission to the world.



Well, because it's Pentecost, we're skipping ahead a few chapters in Genesis. To another story about languages and the tongues in which we speak. I've loved the story of the Tower of Babel 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 had pictures like Erich Lessing's painting from 1563. Half-built, rising into the clouds, the tower's passageways invite us to come and explore. Secret and wondrous things go on inside such structures.



Archaeologists have discovered that in ancient Babylon, today's Iraq, there was indeed a tower, called a ziggurat, more than 300 feet high. Imagine that structure before the winds of the centuries wore it down. Now in our Scripture lesson, 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*. Hubris. Come let us build such a tower that 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 the Contemporary English 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 developed new technology to make their bricks and mortar stronger. 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're heading there this summer for General Assembly. 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 great 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. Within a few centuries, 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.

Circumstances may change, but the human heart does not. Sixteen centuries ago, Augustine described our in-built yearning for God as if he were writing today. This opening chapter of his *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 own mortality. Our mortality is the very evidence of our sin, the evidence that you resist the proud. Yet still, this 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.

We cannot succeed in being our own gods, for that is not how we were made. He will not let us get away with life on our own. He will not be without us. 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. The tower was left unfinished, and the inconsolable longing for peace, security and community remained.

On Pentecost, centuries later, we see the remedy to the tragedy of the Tower of Babel. After he made peace between God and humanity through his death and resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven.. Ten days later, from heaven Jesus sent his Holy Spirit upon his disciples. 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. By his Spirit, Christ Jesus washed clean their sins. The Spirit joined them to Jesus and made them new creations. The Spirit connected them to the Father in intimacy never known before. And the Spirit connected them to each other. It is no wonder that immediately afterward we read how the new community of people located in Christ by the Spirit shared everything. They found at last the peace and presence every restless heart craves. They found a connection and oneness that cut across all cultures and languages of the world.

That 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. Those who share Christ's Spirit discover a connection to each other that crosses all divisions of class or race or nation or even language. All the things that divide us become just accent marks, beauty marks amidst the deeper, lovelier unity we have in Jesus.

So much more awaits us than the bland, futile, and ultimately puny efforts to create our own glory. The scattering of Babel in Genesis, the first book of the Bible describes the tragedy of our pride. But in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we see the splendor and joy of the gathering of Christ's people before his throne.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

I don't need my own Babel about myself. I need the harmony of singing with the angels and saints. My deepest yearning is to be before the Lamb in

the company of the saints, delighting in the Lord's eternally intriguing beauty. If I can walk away from my Tower building and into his presence, into his mission, I can get a taste of that heaven right now.