

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 24, 2021

Hymns: 730 – O for a world where everyone; 471 – We are one in the Spirit;
636 – When voices are confusing

Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 28:23-27; John 14:6

Sermon Title: When Voices Are Confusing

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Acts 28:23-27

They (the local Jewish leaders in Rome) arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement:

“The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” ‘For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.’

John 14:6

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Tower of Babel is one of the great Old Testament stories, a parable of human arrogance and pride, a warning against the abuses of technology, a cautionary tale of the dangers of life in the city, and yet one more example of humanity's attempt to replace God with themselves. But it is also a parable to which we need to pay attention; the result of the Tower plagues us to this very day. This very week, in fact.

I call it a parable because it does what Jesus so often and so memorably does – take a situation familiar to everyone – the dangers of travelling from Jericho to Jerusalem, for instance – introduce a cast of characters – a traveller, some robbers, a few religious folks, a Samaritan - and bring it all together in a story which tells us something important about ourselves, our world, and God.

In calling it a parable, it also brings it out from a single moment of history to a timeless lesson. That is to say, the point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not whether or not that particular event actually took place; the point is, that *kind* of thing (a man robbed and beaten, with seemingly good people doing nothing to help; or a son unwisely blowing his inheritance; or a dishonest manager caught with his hand in the till) happens all the time. What Jesus does with a parable is to derive from those occurrences an insight into humanity, our world, and God. He turns a story, an event, no matter how commonplace or rare, into a timeless Truth, which remains true, long after the story and the events it describe are gone.

And the Tower of Babel is a parable based upon the greatest city of the ancient world – Babylon – and the Ziggurat, or pyramidal stepped temple constructed at its centre. Babylon was a place – the Ziggurat was constructed – but while both the city and the Temple have for long millennia lay in ruins, the truth of the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, and the lessons and consequences derived from it, live on.

In looking a little more closely at the story, we find a couple of things we might otherwise miss. First of all, we are told of a single language uniting all people. One of the central truths of Scripture is that all of humanity is derived from a single source – we are all related – and while the Bible is very familiar about ethnicity (there are those with different backgrounds, cultures, languages), it completely rejects the idea of “race” in the way we understand it today. For instance, skin colour is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament, and not once in the New. It was never seen as a something which separated one person from another, other than giving a clue about their country of origin. Go back far enough, says the Bible, and we all end up in the same place. Go back far enough, and we all have the same mum and dad. The common language is a sign of that.

Notice also that the story tells us that *“As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.”* We pass right over that, but it is actually the first sign of a substantial problem. The plain of Shinar, located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, is not far from where the Bible places the Garden of Eden. God’s command to humanity, right after *“be fruitful and multiply,”* is to *“spread over the earth.”* After the Noah event, when the story of humanity is given a fresh start, the command is reiterated to Noah and his sons: *“Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.”*

Not surprisingly, they get the *“be fruitful”* part right, but the Babel story tells us they get the second part wrong: rather than spreading throughout the earth, they don’t actually get that far, before they say, *“Far enough. Let’s stop here and build a city.”*

Now the Bible isn’t fond of cities. The first city, we are told, was founded by Cain, the murderer of his brother Abel. Not a great start. Remember that Abraham’s nephew Lot settled in Sodom and Gomorrah, cities famous for questionable morality and a brutal lack of hospitality. Babylon, where our story is set, was infamous as the seat of pagan idolatry and heartless military expansionism. It was Babylon which would later utterly destroy Jerusalem; it was Babylon which provided the bloodthirsty false gods Baal, Astarte, Molech, to which the Israelites were so often fatally drawn. Nothing good comes out of cities, is the Old Testament’s opinion. Put enough people too close together, and bad things happen.

Which is what happens in Babel. And here we are introduced to the first bit of humour in the story – the Babylonians, employing spiffy new technology, build with brick, made with mud, rather than with stone. Go to Israel, where stone was used for construction, and you can find buildings thousands of years old, still standing. Go to Babylon, and the brick buildings have largely returned to the mud with which they were made. Man-made materials, rather than natural materials, are a problem right off the bat.

Problems with building materials multiply, as the bricks, we are told, are glued together with tar, rather than with proper mortar. This project is doomed from the start.

But the human arrogance is not limited to the use of building technology. They decide to employ their concentrated numbers and high tech economy to challenge even the heavens. *“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”* We reject God’s plan. We will not be scattered. We make the rules. We are the important ones. It is our name, rather than the name of God, which will endure.

And now, another moment of humour in a dark story: *“But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.”* This was the tower that would pierce the very heavens, and challenge the God of heaven. But God had to come down, just to see it. The tower was too small to see from heaven. The hubris of man, so great in his own eyes, could not even be seen from heaven.

Yuri Gagarin, first man in space, looks out his capsule window in low Earth orbit, and is famously said to declare, “I see no god up here.” An ant climbs up from his hole, stands upon the highest tip of the anthill, and says, “I see no god up here.” And yet we persist in believing, Babel-like, that with our pride and technology, we can declare that we are masters of the heavens; that our instruments can somehow detect God. *“But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.”*

The Lord said, *“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”*

Like a parent discovering a group of rebellious teens up to no good, they are told to scatter. Those kids are not to communicate with one another any longer. They are not permitted to text one another, or email, or gather in internet chat-rooms. Their twitter accounts are suspended. They are blocked from using Facebook and Instagram (sorry, I may be drifting into political territory here). In the Biblical parlance, in the ancient version of shutting down their social media contact, their language is confused, and they are scattered. Not because they threatened heaven – once again, we are told, the Lord had to “go down” to initiate this confusion – but because, in their vain abuse of power and technology, they threatened themselves.

And so, they are cursed with confusion, with a failure to understand one another. And not only does the project die, not only does the great city and mud-brick tower fall into ruin, the confusion and failure to understand one another continues to this day.

And that curse, heightened and amplified to dangerous proportions by the undermining of even the most basic concept of “truth,” all in the name of self-aggrandizement and xenophobic arrogance, continues to bear its rotting fruit. It is becoming ever-more difficult to envision how the divisions of our neighbours to the south can ever be healed. There is, Babel-like, a complete inability to speak the same language, to understand what the other is really saying, or even to listen to one another in the first place.

Seven hundred years before Jesus, Isaiah uttered a prophecy from the heart of God, a prophecy which Jesus himself was to quote, and which the Apostle Paul was to make use of again: *“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.”* A better description of the discordancies in our own world is difficult to imagine. Hearts closed to one another; ears shut to one another; eyes blind to the truth. How can healing even begin? What, in our arrogance, have we become?

But there is a way out. There is a light in the darkness. There is a path forward, a path to understanding, a path to healing, a path back to God. It is not in the form of a tower that reaches to the heavens, but in a God who reaches down to us; it does not come with a ziggurat piercing the sky, but a cross which pierces the heart. It comes with Jesus, who has come to reverse the curse of the tower, the forbidden fruit, the rebellion against God. Jesus, who comes to bring us home.

It is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that we find the way to heaven, the truth of our purpose, the life which matters, and which will never die. It is in Jesus that the divisions between us will be brought down, it is in Jesus that racism and suspicion will crumble, it is in Jesus that we are again brought together as one. Not as a challenge to God, but as the family of God.

And it is in Jesus that we can be united again in a single language, spoken in many different ways; and that is the language of compassion. The language of forgiveness. The language of love. When we speak to one another in love, with words and deeds of love, it does not matter what language we speak, for love transcends them all. When we feed the hungry, we speak with the language of love. When we heal the sick, we speak with the language of love. When we forgive a brother, a sister, when we embrace the lost, when we comfort the dying and embrace the grieving, we speak with the language of love.

It is no coincidence that on the day of Pentecost, those being blessed by the Holy Spirit spoke all the languages of the known world. Nor is it a coincidence that in doing so, they were understood by all. Listen:

When the day of Pentecost came, the believers were all together in one place... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

It means nothing less than that the curse of the Tower of Babel is, by the power of God, reversed; that those who were scattered, are united again; that in Jesus, we are brought together, one family, one people, united in the language of love. As Paul triumphantly declared, *"Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

We, in our unity, are called to lead the way. We who carry the name of Christ, in whatever language we speak, in whichever denomination we serve, are called to be a single witness to the healing power of Jesus. We are called to be a community of care, of compassion, of forgiveness, of love. We are called to bring, by message and example, the word of hope and healing to our world. It is why Jesus' prayer again and again was that we love one another, and that we would be, in that love, united as one. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he said, "if you love one another."

We live in a hurting world. A divided world. A Babel world. A world of hard hearts, of plugged ears, of tight-shut eyes. But it is precisely this kind of world in which we are called to shine, together, in love, forgiveness and compassion, a family of faith, pointing to the God and Father who unites us all, who loves us all, who heals us all, who longs to bring us home.

May we rise to this sacred task, until all are gathered under the single banner of love. Amen.