

Giving Up Our Attempts to be God for Lent...for LIFE!

Based on Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-17

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on March 3, 2024

Our two passages for this morning couldn't be more opposite. One is from the early Old Testament, the first book of the Torah; the other comes from after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. One passage demonstrates the human desire to attain glory and even God-like status, while the other reflects God's desire to be with us in the here and now. One shows humans, in their pride, trying to build a stairway to heaven, while the other puts forth a God who descends to earth in all humility.

The Tower of Babel, be it mythological or somehow historical, was probably not a "tower" in the way we picture that word. Scholars and archeologists agree that it was probably a ziggurat, a fairly common structure in Babylon in this time period, over a thousand years before the time of Jesus. A ziggurat was more of a pyramid than a tower, with stairs or steps leading up each of its four sides. I saw a number of these when I went to Egypt years ago, and the Egyptians referred to them as "step pyramids." But what we should focus our attention on in this story is not so much the specifics or specs of the structure the people were building, but rather their reason or motivation for building it. This motive is clearly stated in verse four of chapter 11: "Let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves..." In other words, 'we want to get up where God is, and we want to be known throughout the world for doing so.'

The people here are seeking equality with God. They want to be where God is and to have access to everything God has access to. In short, they wanted to make themselves "like God." Does that ring any bells for anyone...? It should, because a mere eight chapters earlier in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve were living in the Garden of Eden, the serpent tries to tempt them into eating from the tree of life. Eve, at first refuses, telling the serpent that if they eat or even touch it, they will surely die. But the serpent says, "You will NOT die. God doesn't want you to eat it because if you do, your eyes will be open and *you will be...like God.*" Like God...There it is – one of the great recurring sins of humanity – the desire to transcend our humanness and human limitations and become like God. It is arguably the most prominent and oft' repeated sin in all of human history, from the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel, to the building of the Golden Calf to James and John asking to sit at the right and left hand of the Father in heaven.

Human pride...human lust for power...the desire to somehow make ourselves immortal and God-like: it is all over the testaments – Old and New. God’s unequivocal rejection of this tower or ziggurat in Genesis 11 was supposed to remind us of the intended order of things, the created order, if you will. But we humans have never accepted limitations well, have we? One might argue that the entire history of human technology is nothing more than our scientific attempts to transcend our human limitations. One by one, we keep breaking barriers that a few years ago seemed utterly unfathomable: flight and air travel, space travel, cloning, defying human aging, and now A.I. The list goes on and on.

Fear not – I am not a Luddite – but the Tower of Babel is a worthy metaphor depicting the human desire to be ‘like God.’ And, at the very least, it begs us to ask the question, “In what ways are we trying to strive for God-like power or control in our own lives...? In what ways do I grasp for or seek power or authority that doesn’t belong to me...? Could it be in the way I think about and treat minorities or immigrants? Might it be in the way I judge and condemn others who are different than I or who commit sins that are different than the ones I commit? Perhaps our grasping for God-like power takes the form of our trying to resist change in our lives and in the world. Some of us refuse to admit that we are aging, that we are losing some of the capacities and abilities we once had. Many of us refuse to accept death when it comes to those we love, treating death like a hostile invader rather than a part of the natural order that all mortals must face sooner or later. Or it could be as simple as all the times we try to control situations – or even people - and try to make things work out the way WE think they should. Anyway you slice it, we are still building towers of Babel in our lives today.

But then we turn to the Pentecost story of Acts chapter 2, and what we find is the divine reversal of everything we just saw in Genesis 11. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, this Pentecost story offers God’s alternative to all our ill-advised stairways to heaven. And, of course, Pentecost *isn’t* the first time God reverses the attempted ascent at Babel. The very birth and incarnation of Jesus that first Christmas was the very same thing, right? God coming down to us, so that we might no longer seek to ascend toward God. But by this point in biblical history – Acts chapter 2 - I’ve often wondered whether God had simply had enough of all our grasping and climbing, and She simply decided to descend to us en masse, by means of the Holy Spirit, so that we would no longer grasp at God-like power and control.

Pentecost really is the definitive anti-Babel moment God gives us. The story begins much like the Babel story. As Luke's account in Acts puts it, "they were all together in one place," a line so compelling that Don McLean stole it to open the 5th verse of "Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie." And in this totally communal, "for everyone" moment, God's promised Spirit descends upon all the people – ALL the people.

Jesus told us this would happen. He promised us that he would not leave us alone and that he'd send us a counselor, a comforter, an advocate that would lead us into all truth – *here* on earth, in *this* place – so we'd stop trying to grasp for what was God's and not ours. And while in Babel, God seemed to act in a way that hindered communication between humans by creating different languages, at Pentecost, God actually fosters *better* communication by having the Spirit's descent be communicated in every language represented in that huge crowd. God wanted no one to miss out on this great anti-Babel truth: that God comes *down* to be WITH US in the whole of human experience.

I would argue that this is the crux of the matter where Christianity is concerned. It's what we're using Lent to prepare ourselves for when Holy Week comes around again. In Jesus AND in the Spirit, God comes down to us – as John's Gospel puts it – "to make His dwelling with us." And this is NOT just a temporary thing. It's permanent and its universal. That's the difference between the Jesus and Christmas experience and the Pentecost one. Acts 2 affirms that God is staying. God is not going anywhere, and that is why Holy Week is SO important. Jesus didn't just come for the early years and the comfortable part of being human. He stayed through the entire thing – the suffering and the death – so that we might know that God's descent is forever... for the WHOLE of life, the whole of the human experience, and the whole of human history.

I love the way Paul puts it in the great Kenosis chapter of Philippians 2, where he writes to us and to any who would build our towers of Babel: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the very nature of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped – or, we might say, Babel-ed – but instead emptied himself, taking on the very form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in the appearance of a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross! Therefore, God has exalted him and has given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Note to self: Jesus didn't build a stairway to heaven. He didn't try to reach for and grasp a power that belonged only to God. He emptied himself and became a servant. And God came to him, descended to him, and lifted Jesus up.

This Lenten season, I want to encourage all followers of Jesus to give up our towers of Babel. I want us to set aside all of those ways that we're still seeking to grasp authority, power, or control that *does not belong to us*. I want us to willingly set aside all those ways we are trying to climb our stairways to heaven, earn our way to God, or solidify our place in some heavenly kingdom. What I want us to do instead is to more finely tune our spiritual radar for all the ways we see and sense God's work down here. After all, God has chosen, in Jesus and in the Spirit, to make His dwelling place here. So, our work – throughout Lent AND throughout life - is *not* to climb nor to grasp, but to empty ourselves as Jesus did, taking the form of a servant. May it be so in each of us, this day and forever more. Amen.