

The Unfinished City
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-12
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
June 5, 2022

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
[God] will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:1-5, NRSV).

It's Pentecost.

And here we are, all together in one place,
praying and singing, and listening.

But this, all of this, it didn't happen by accident.

Our worship today is not a spontaneous eruption,
an extemporaneous production,
an extraneous interruption.

No, we have planned for this service, this particular service.

We have planned for Pentecost:

hymns chosen, children's time prepared, church building cleaned,
chairs straightened, bulletin printed, words written,
lawn mowed, prayers prayed, doors unlocked, lights on,
coffee brewed, music practiced,
microphones connected, slides projected, sermon . . . perfected.

And so, far, everything has gone as expected.

Most of you came and were seated as close to 9:30 am as possible,
before or after, no judgment.

We've followed an order of worship that, with some minor variations,
matches the one last week

and the week before, and the week before that --

Song, Opening & Prayer, Songs,

Children's Time, Offertory, and here we are.
No, I don't think this sermon is perfect, whatever that means,
but I have planned to talk for eighteen to twenty minutes, more or less,
then it's sharing, prayer, singing, announcements, benediction,
before wrapping it all up around 11:45 or so.
That's what you expect, that's what we've prepared, and that's what will happen.
Probably. Maybe.
You see, it's Pentecost, and, if we're open to it, our plans can be unmade.

Now, my point in reviewing all our preparations and expectations for this service,
is not to draw a contrast between our plans for today
and the Holy Spirit pouring out on the believers at Pentecost.
The Spirit works in many different ways and in people --
including in and through our worship order, music styles,
structures, and prayerful planning.

But when we think about our work and our worship,
when we think about our lives,
both collectively and individually
we shouldn't be asking about our planning or our preferences,
we should be asking ourselves this question --
to whom do they point?

After the flood, Noah's family was fruitful and multiplied, to say the least.
Genesis, chapter 10, is primarily a genealogy of Noah's descendants,
and then we get to this:

Genesis chapter 11, verses 1 to 4.

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 fire 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." (NRSV)

We call it the story of the Tower of Babel,
but we often neglect that the people weren't just building a tower.
They were building a city.
They didn't want to be scattered.
They wanted to be all together in one place.
They wanted to make a name for themselves.
Building a city like that, constructing a tower like that,
that doesn't happen by accident.
No. It takes discipline.

A strong central administration.
Clarity of vision, unity of purpose, efficiency in production.

To whom do our towers – our lives – our plans – our worship point?

Genesis chapter 11, verses 5 to 9:

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. (NRSV)

Some people read this story and find in it a lesson
about the fallenness of human beings and God's punishment of sin.
In that reading, the tower of Babel represents the sin of pride and idolatry --
and God curses the people by creating different languages.
But nothing is said in this story about any of those things -
nothing about sin, nothing about punishment, nothing about curses.

Sure, in this story, God thwarts the people's plans
to build a great tower and a great city by confusing their languages,
but I read this as blessing, not curse.
I see this as grace, not punishment.

After all, it is the different languages that propels them outward,
into the world, scattered to the ends of the earth.
It is the different languages
that foil their empty desire to make their own name great.
It is the different languages
that allows them to fulfill God's purposes.
It is the different languages
that will turn them toward each other
and not toward the work of their hands.
It is the different languages and their scattering
that reflect the character and will of God.

Just after this story, in Genesis, chapter 12,
we're told the story
of God's call to Abram.

With the lessons of Babel in mind, listen to what God tells him
"Go, from your country and your kindred and your father."
"I will make you a great nation."
"I will bless you."

"I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."
"In you, *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed."

God is the centrifugal power that calls us
and propels us out, to the other
as a way to give and receive God's blessing.

Where do our work, our worship, our lives, point?
Do they point to ourselves,
to *our* purity, to *our* wisdom, to *our* righteousness,
to our faithfulness, to *our* open-mindedness, to *our* inclusiveness,
to *our* love?

Absent of the Spirit, we are not the good news that the world,
this country, so desperately needs.

Those disciples were all together in one place.
Jesus had told them to wait,
to wait to be clothed with power from on high.
So they waited.
They were together, in one place, waiting.

And so they waited. Now, they didn't wait idly.
They prayed. Constantly. And they held a business meeting.

Their bylaws said that they needed twelve apostles and they only had eleven.
So they had a gifts discernment process,
and Matthias was called to fill the empty apostle position.

They gathered together.
They prayed.
They waited.
They went home.

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As the days turned into weeks,
they must have asked the question
that maybe you have asked about the church.

Is this "it?" Is this all there is?
Same routines, same structure, same practices, same people,
same schedule.

(Pause)

Sometimes, "It" happens.
"It" sounded like the blowing of a violent wind.

“It” came from heaven and filled the whole house.
“It” fanned into flame what seemed like tongues of fire
resting on each one of them.

This wild wind Spirit of God
swirled around them,
blowing open the doors,
from the inside out,
toppling over their understandings of
who was in, who was not,
who could speak, who could not,
who could lead, who cannot.

And that sound of a violent wind,
became the sound of their own voices
speaking in different languages
praising the name of the Lord
to Parthians, Medes, and Elamites,
to residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea and Cappadocia,
to those from Pontus and Asia,
Phrygia and Pamphylia,
to people from Egypt and parts of Libya,
to visitors from Rome
to Cretans and Arabs.

You see, the lesson of Babel is not that the different languages are a curse,
a punishment
the lesson of Babel is fulfilled by the Spirit at Pentecost --
the miracle of speaking and hearing
the same good news
in different languages.

God blesses beautiful diversity as a sign
that the good news of Jesus
is meant for the entire world
not for a select few all together,
sitting in one place.

The Holy Spirit of God is God’s Force of Disruption,
disrupting the hell out of the world
and replacing it with sign of God’s reign.

This is the disruption that the world so desperately needs --
that we so desperately need.

Genesis says that the city of Babel, the tower of Babel
was left unfinished –
a sign of misplaced human desires that point nowhere but towards themselves.

But God isn't finished.

You, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

"See," God says, "I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
God's special possession,
that you may declare the praises of him
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.
(1 Peter 2:5-10)

After all, the world cannot know of its brokenness and hopelessness
unless a people exist who show an alternative way of life.

The world cannot know that there is an alternative to violence, to war,
unless a people living in peace work at making peace

The world cannot know that the weak and the vulnerable are cared for by God,
unless there is a people that practice a different sort of economy.

The world cannot know that the race to consume and acquire is not the way of God
unless there is a people that practices simplicity as a discipline.

The world cannot know the unsurpassable worth of human life
without a people who consistently work to protect it.

The world cannot know that it is broken and becoming dismembered,
unless there is a people that gather as one while honoring the many.

The world cannot know that there's a wideness in God's mercy,
without a people willing to extend the wideness of God's mercy.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
by the power of that Pentecost wind,
may it be so with us. Amen.