Building A Tower

TEXT: Genesis 11:1-9

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 10, 2023

The Tower of Babel story stands in an interesting place in Genesis. We have skipped over the story of Noah and the flood for now, although in a bit we'll look at how the ending of Noah's story in Genesis 9 connects with this one. But first, I want to look at the landscape both before and after this brief story, as the writer of Genesis winds us through time and space with the genealogy of the sole surviving family of the Great Flood, Noah and his kin.

As we read of fathers and sons, we hear the origin story of the nations of the earth. One of Noah's grandsons is named Egypt, for example. Canaan is another. The intention of that march across time is to end up at the birth of Abraham, whose story picks up in Genesis 12. But the journey takes a detour. Partway through the genealogy of Shem, the son who is Abraham's direct ancestor in this record, the parade of ancestors makes a pit stop in the region known as Babel, to explain the origins of different languages and tell us about a grand, yet unfinished tower. Why the interruption? And why here?

I went down the rabbit hole of the genealogies this week so you don't have to, but the bottom line is that there are two people in Noah's genealogy where many have seen a connection to the Tower of Babel story. You can find the rabbit hole by finding the break in the usual pattern of genealogies. Normally it's just a list of this person is the father of that person who is the father of this next person, and so on with any details repeated for each person. In Genesis 10, those details include the nations they founded.

The first break comes in the descendants of Noah's son Ham, specifically with Ham's son Cush. Genesis 10:8 tells us that "Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior. **9** He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord.' **10** The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city."

Those areas established by Nimrod, represent the Mesopotamian cradle of civilization. Calah was the capital of Assyria in the ninth century BCE and today the city is called, Nimrud, an echo of its legendary founder. It sits just south of Mosul in Iraq. Nineveh is technically *in* Mosul, and the ruins of ancient Nineveh sit just across the Tigris River. Ancient Nineveh eventually outstripped Calah in importance and took over as Assyria's capital in the seventh century BCE. Since it's Calah and not Nineveh that the genealogy calls "the great city," that might be one clue to dating the written record.

But Nimrod didn't begin there in the north. Fifty-two miles south of Nineveh, Genesis tells us that Nimrod began his kingdom in Babel, which would become Babylon, the capital city of the Babylonian Empire, becoming the largest city in the world by population, housing over 200,000 people, taking the largest-city title away from Nineveh, as the Babylonian Empire laid waste to Assyria. It was Babylon that would next lay siege to Jerusalem, burn the Temple, and carry its people off into exile in the early sixth century BCE.

But whether Nimrod or someone else founded them, Nineveh and Babylon were both small once, and to get to our tower story, we first need some context about ancient cities. The very earliest cities in Mesopotamia all began as religious sites with a temple to a local god. That temple required tending, and so, even if most of the local population were nomads wandering the region, the temple was soon surrounded by housing for temple priests and other workers who became part of the temple complex.

Temples also served as the world's first banks, since the god for whom the temple was built was clearly the best choice to protect the most valuable things held by a tribe, city, or nation. In time, the temple as a bank made the temple complex a desirable location for traders and business as well as those with religious duties.

Proximity to the god as well as the safe place to store wealth led nobles and ultimately kings to prefer living nearby. The god could provide legitimacy to their rule, while also keeping them close to their most valuable assets, allowing trade with visiting nobility, and symbols of status to show off. And those wealthy folks wanted services. Soon you have a city.

In Mesopotamia, those early temples were often ziggurats—we sometimes call them stepped pyramids. Unlike the smooth Egyptian pyramids that served as grand burial chambers, the ziggurats had steps for a reason. They were built as stairs for the god of the temple to come down to earth to receive offerings, worship, or otherwise check out what his or her subjects were doing. Thus, the towering ziggurat needed to reach toward the heavens as far as possible to help the god get down. Whether aged gods needed an Acorn Stair Lift is still up for debate.

What the stairs were definitely NOT for is for the people to climb up, except to build or enhance the structure. Worshippers were allowed no further than the base of the temple, where they presented their offerings to the priests who took them inside to present to the god. Gods were fearsome and picky. The god approaches the worshipers, and comes to visit the city, not the other way around. Not a priest? You do **not** go inside the temple; neither do you ascend the stairs on the outside.

Hold that thought as we jump back to the genealogy for the other connection to the Tower of Babel story. The mighty hunter Nimrod whose kingdom began in Babel—later Babylon—was descended from Ham, Noah's youngest son. But it's Noah's son Shem whose descendants eventually lead to Abraham.

Midway through Shem's genealogy we find two brothers, Peleg and Joktan, and the genealogy pattern breaks again here to note that Peleg, whose name in Hebrew means "division," was given that name because, as the text says, "in his days the earth was divided." Joktan's genealogy finishes up here in chapter 10.

But Peleg, who is the brother who continues on to Abraham, has his story paused here until we learn about a tower that became a source of division at a site where Peleg's great-uncle Nimrod built a city. Only after that story does Shem's lineage move on to its final destination. So we sit at Babel, before it was part of an empire, back when it was simply known as a small religious and cultural site. Which means it had a temple, likely a ziggurat, and a community that was beginning to build around it.

As Babel became Babylon, its influence grew with the city to include the nearby area of Borsippa (11 miles to the south) and extending all the way north to Nineveh. Each new city would have begun the same way—as a sacred site where a temple was built and a complex around it for the temple priests and caretakers.

If you looked at your copy of the Messenger this week, the image I used to go with the sermon is a modern picture of the ruins of Borsippa. Why? Because of the ruined tower there that both Talmudic and Arabic culture claim is the Tower of Babel site. It is known today as the "Tongue Tower."

That claim is bolstered by the work of Sir Henry Rawlinson, known as the Father of Assyriology, who in the 19th century found some inscribed cylinders in the walls of that ruined tower. Dating to the end of the 7th century BCE, the text on the cylinder claimed that those very walls where the cylinders were placed had been part of an abandoned tower, left unfinished by an unknown, ancient king on that site. The cylinders were left there by King Nebuchadnezzar II who claimed in the inscription to have finished the abandoned tower, before also building a towering ziggurat in Babylon proper.

Nebuchadnezzar II indeed is known beyond the Bible for building not only the ziggurat in Babylon but also for building the ancient wonder of the world known as The Hanging Gardens of Babylon and who squashed the Israelite kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BCE.

Even though I'm always warning you that the Bible isn't written to give us factual information; that doesn't mean that everything in it is made up out of whole cloth. We can never know for sure, but the Tower of Babel is a story that, I think, has its origins in the lore surrounding an actual tower that, for some reason, was never finished until centuries if not millennia later when King Nebuchadnezzar II came along.

But the story isn't in Genesis to prove or disprove that there was an actual tower or that God disrupted the building to create different languages. The story may have some factual basis; but the stories of the Bible are there to teach us truth, not facts. Here the Bible takes the natural questions people would have about an unfinished, ancient tower and uses them to teach us something about who God is, how people behave, and how those who want to be faithful to that God should respond in our own lives.

So, if we adjust our lens a bit, what do we see on that front? In the story, God is not a happy camper and does not approve of the tower and surrounding city. But why? I think there are three possibilities that could exist either singly or in combination, with all of them resonating today.

The one I latched onto the very first time I heard this story as a child was that the people are not building out of devotion to God but out of arrogance. "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves." That verse stood out to me decades before I knew that cities began with temples that were often towers of various kinds. That ancient cities began as temple complexes devoted to a god, makes the desire of the people in Babel to make a name for *themselves* with that tower and city all the more egregious.

But in the text, God isn't calling out their arrogance, at least not directly. God is concerned about what *else* they might do if they continue to operate as a unit with no language barrier, a single focus, and no diversity. In response, God scatters them across the earth. So, if scattering people is the answer, there must be a different question.

Rabbinic midrash on this text reminds us that, back before the genealogy of chapter 10, we have the end of the story of Noah and the flood. Once Noah and his family have landed the ark on Mt. Ararat, which is found on today's Turkish/Syrian border, God gives them a command. Genesis 9:1, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." That command is repeated in verse 7.

What the rabbis point out is that staying put in a settled city is the exact opposite of God's command to Noah's descendants. That interpretation fits with God's solution, which is to block their ability to communicate and to scatter the people across the earth. And just as God commanded Noah and his family to fill the earth twice in chapter 9; twice in chapter 11 we are told that God "scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." You can't effectively fulfill Adam's charge to serve and protect the earth, if you're holed up in just one tiny corner of it watching Netflix.

That interpretation makes the scattering a punishment that fits the crime. God told them to fill the earth and the people said, "No, thank you, we'll just build ourselves an amazing city and stay right here." God responds, "Uh, no," shuts down Google Translate, and forces them to scatter—to become different peoples with different languages, traditions, and cultures in all the parts of the earth. That's a really viable addition to the arrogance interpretation, but I'm not sure it goes far enough.

A new thing I realized just this past Friday is that this story prefigures a biblical story from a couple thousand years later when someone else wanted to build a temple and a city. That person was, like Nimrod, a great warrior who rose to lead his people. His name was David, and he was king of Israel around 1,000 BCE. David wanted to build a temple in the new place he had just conquered—Jerusalem.

Before David's time, the center of worship for Israel moved around. Israel's most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments as well as other artifacts from Israel's wandering in the wilderness, was kept in the Tent of Meeting, which Moses built at God's instruction in the Sinai desert. It was designed specifically to move as the people moved.

Once the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the Ark still moved from place to place, even as settled towns developed. On occasion it was even captured by enemies and had to be recovered. Israel had no capital city or central location for worship, even when the people got their first king, King Saul. During Saul's reign the Ark was still on the move—mostly moving between the larger centers of Shiloh and Shechem—but there was no temple.

David became king of Israel on Saul's death, conquered the area that is now Jerusalem and decided that he wanted to build up that area as Israel's capital by building a permanent home for the Ark on what is now known as the Temple Mount. If a tent is good, a cedar structure painted in gold leaf is better, no? David's prophet Nathan is pleased, but that night God comes to Nathan with a pointed complaint for David.

This is from 2 Samuel 7:6-7; God is speaking. "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved

about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"

There were shrines in various towns and even in some homes. But THE center of worship? No. God was quite content to be represented in a tent that could move as the people moved—in fact it was preferable. Even though, unlike at Babel, David is building for God's glory and not his own, God doesn't want a stationary temple, which would locate the sacred here and not there. God doesn't like it.

God did relent, but will not allow David to build the temple because he has too much blood on his hands. It's David's son Solomon who builds the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon was the last king to rule over a united Israel. Once the kingdoms divided into north and south, a second temple was built for the northern kingdom on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria, now in the West Bank. Then the fighting started, first rooted in where it was appropriate to worship—an argument that Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well a millennium later in John 4. The bloodshed continues to this very day.

The Tower of Babel story can be seen as a harbinger of the later dispute about the Temple in Jerusalem. The message I hear is that human beings are meant to be scattered into diverse families, peoples, languages, and nations. To serve and protect every inch of the earth; to be the keeper of all of God's children. God is happy to travel; to be with each and speak in ways that each can appreciate and understand. No one place on the earth is more of a home to God than any other. The sacred cannot be located here and not there.

There is danger in a monolith and it's the danger we see today in monopolies, oligarchs, financial bubbles, and ideological and religious echo chambers. When we gather together with a singular focus; when we all speak the same language both literally and metaphorically, no task will be impossible for us. But we will miss the critical perspective of those who are different, which leaves us vulnerable.

We lose dissenting voices who might say to us—well, just because you *could* doesn't mean you *should*. We begin to think that we and our ways are the best and only ways, and feel free to abolish anything that appears to be "other." We start to believe that the stairs on the tower are for us rather than for God; that we dwell in the city to be served rather than to serve.

The covenant God makes with Noah after the flood in Genesis 9 is called the "Universal" covenant because God makes it not just with Noah and his family, but with all living things. The covenant God makes with Abram in Genesis 12 is that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Sandwiched between those two covenants is the attempt by Noah's sons to resist difference and to isolate themselves in just one community in one city with one tower. God doesn't even let them finish it. As Peleg's name suggests, they were divided and scattered across the earth to take the blessing God had given them to every tribe and nation, and to every living thing.

As for Peleg, his family didn't go far. They ended up about 40 miles south of Borsippa's tower in the Chaldean city of Ur, which was the largest city in the world in 2100 BCE. The great city of Babylon was still just Babel then, a small area to the north, known as a religious and cultural site.

And it was in Ur that Peleg's great, great, great grandson, Abram, heard God say that he, too, needed to scatter. From Genesis 12:1 "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Amen.