

Strange Provisions: A Sermons Series preached at Emory Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA)

Part 3: Babble On

(1 Corinthians 2:6-13); Genesis 11:1-9

January 29, 2017

Our Old Testament reading this morning is the story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11, verses 1-9. Let us continue to listen for the word of God:

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 burn 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." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

This is the Witness of Scripture. **Thanks Be to God.**

We all knew that the election of Donald Trump, a businessman with no government experience, to the office of the presidency would bring about sweeping change to America's political landscape—that things might go a little differently than they have before. The actions of the nascent Trump administration have borne out these expectations: these first 15 days have been quite the roller coaster, if you've been paying attention to the news at all. But executive and congressional action in Washington D.C. is not the whole story, because there have been ongoing demonstrations and protests in the streets, at airports, around the country, and here in Atlanta. For those who support the efforts of the administration, the protests are as disruptive as the administration's orders are to the protesters. Whichever way one turns, there is confusion.

A faithful response to confusing times can, itself, present yet another source of confusion. As our epistle lesson this morning indicates, the wisdom of God is a mystery, hidden away and standing in stark contrast to the wisdom of the world. I hope that this contrast has been evident in our exploration of the book of Genesis these past two weeks, in which we've sought the "strange provisions" and hidden mysteries of God in relation to the most basic features of human existence. This morning, I am bringing this three-part series to a close with a story that speaks to the confusion of our times—indeed, it is a story about how confusion came to be—and in it, we find the strangest provision of all—what I call "the gift of division."

That's right. The *gift* of division. Not the *curse* of division. Not the *sin* of division, but the unfathomable *strange provision* of difference in the world.

This is not normally how we hear this story. As the late-great-Princeton Theologian and Old Testament scholar Bernard Anderson puts it,<sup>1</sup> the story of the Tower of Babel is traditionally interpreted as one more instance of humanity's sinful pride resulting in the loss of some better, more originary state: in this case, the unity of humankind. The traditional reading goes like this: motivated by the Promethean impulse to "storm the heavens and be like God," a unified humanity sets to work upon a tower or Ziggurat, connecting earth to heaven. But their efforts are fatally flawed, and doomed to failure, because they are motivated by a foolish desire to set man in the place of God. So God punishes this original human community, thwarting their efforts to build the tower, confusing their once-universal language, and scattering them upon the earth to live separately. This confusion—*balal*, in Hebrew— of language, and the subsequent division of peoples one from another sets the historical foundation for the wars of conquest that would plague this region (which would come to be known as *Babylonia*) and, indeed, all of humanity until the present day. On this reading, Anderson concludes, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic pluralism is at best a necessary evil, to keep humankind from taking the place of God, or at worst, is a divine punishment that is the basis of all future war and strife.

Now, throughout this sermon series, I have been offering counterintuitive re-readings of these ancient stories from Genesis. In the story of Eve and Adam's eating of the Forbidden Fruit, we saw that sin does not enter the world through the temptation of the "weaker sex," but rather is a side effect of exercising the freedom God give us to act out of desires and intentions wholly our own. Similarly, in the story of Cain and Abel, Cain's disappointment, frustration, and anger were not sinful in and of

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<sup>1</sup> B. Anderson, "Unity and diversity in God's creation: a study of the Babel story," *Currents In Theology And Mission* vol. 5, no. 2 (1978): 69-81.

themselves. Emotions are neither good nor bad; anger is merely energy, after all. It is only when the energy of anger is turned to destructive, even murderous ends that it becomes the object of God's judgment.

So in this week's story of the Tower of Babel, I would argue that the traditional understanding of the scattering of the people and confusion of their languages as punishment for having the gall to try and build a shoddy tower up to the heavens simply misses the point. By focusing upon the element of *pride*, we miss what's really going on. As Anderson point out, the original intent behind building the city and the tower is not to somehow capture or become equal to God; it is rather to *avoid* being "scattered across the face of the earth." "There is something very human," Anderson writes, "in this portrayal of people who, with mixed pride and anxiety, attempted to preserve primeval unity." In building the city and its iconic tower, this people who share a common language and a common way of life sought to orient all their efforts towards their own glory and achievement, in order to maintain their unity *as a people*, and, ultimately, to isolate themselves from the outside world.

Anderson goes on to say, "It is God who counteracts this movement toward a center with a centrifugal force that disperses them into linguistic, spatial, and ethnic diversity." This indicates that "God's will for...creation is diversity rather than homogeneity," and that "Pluralism is to be welcomed as a divine blessing." Here Anderson echoes the words of John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, when he pointed out that "Men had already been spread abroad [we saw this last week, in Cain's wandering away from his family]; and this ought not to be regarded as punishment, seeing it rather flowed from the benediction and grace of God." There is little evidence in the text or in the subsequent scriptures that this story is about God punishing humanity or punishing the Babylonians for their hubris in building a tower. It never even says that God destroys the tower (though I think that detail is often added into the telling of this story). In their division, in their difference, the people are no longer oriented by this singular monument to their own isolationist tendencies. God's confusion of their language and disorientation of their designs was an act of strange provision, indicating that plurality, rather than homogeneity, is the original and ultimate state of being for humankind. Another Old Testament scholar, Terrence Fretheim, puts it this way: "God promotes diversity at the expense of any form of unity that seeks to preserve itself in isolation from the rest of creation...Unity will be forged most successfully in getting beyond one's own kind on behalf of the Word in the world."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Terrence E. Fretheim, "Commentary on Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Eds. Keck et al., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 413-414.

About a year ago, New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a piece called “The Governing Cancer of Our Time.” He began it this way:

We live in a big, diverse society. There are essentially two ways to maintain order and get things done in such a society—*politics*, or some form of dictatorship...Politics is an activity in which you recognize the simultaneous existence of different groups, interests, and opinions. You find some ways to balance or reconcile or compromise those interests, at least a majority of them...The downside of politics is that people never really get everything they want...Politics is a muddled activity in which people have to recognize restraints and settle for less than they want...But that’s sort of the beauty of politics, too. It involves an endless conversation in which we learn about other people and see things from their vantage point and try to balance their needs against our own.<sup>3</sup>

Brooks goes on to argue that the last 30 years or so has seen a growing number of people who are *against* this idea of politics, who desire to see the government run by those without political expertise or experience, and who don’t recognize the legitimacy of any opinion other than their own. “They want total victories for themselves and their doctrines.” Such “antipolitical people” refuse compromise, and seek instead to impose their views through sheer force. Antipolitics works against genuine politics, grinding the gears of government to a halt. Frustration at this failure only builds upon itself. “People feel unheard, which makes them shout even louder, which further destroys conversation.” Brooks’ diagnosis of our current political moment is that the past 30 years of antipolitical governance has culminated in a candidate—now president—who relies upon authoritarian tactics to “bully his way through” the gridlock of our antipolitical decadence. “The answer to Trump,” Brooks concludes, “is politics. It’s acknowledging that other people exist. It’s taking pleasure in that difference and hammering out workable arrangements.”

The confusion of our present political moment is not the result of difference. It is the result of making differences absolute, of embracing the isolationist tendencies that would seek to make this country a walled-in city, where we build towers that bring prestige and fame to a single name—to give in to the centripetal force of “America first” ideologies that insulate and isolate the people of this nation from those of other nations who do not share our language or history or culture. There was, indeed, something broken in Babylon, that ancient seat of imperial power that sought to subdue all the world

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<sup>3</sup> David Brooks, “The Governing Cancer of Our Time,” *New York Times* (Feb. 26, 2016) <[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/opinion/the-governing-cancer-of-our-time.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/opinion/the-governing-cancer-of-our-time.html?_r=0)>.

under its brutal and violent authority. There is, indeed, something to be anxious about for those inside the walled city...but it is not the “bad dudes” on the other side of the wall, who speak different languages, or pray to God in different ways, who ought to be the source of our anxiety. It is rather the judgment of God against those who refuse to accept the diversity of humankind for what it is—something flowing from the benediction and grace of God—the strange provision of humanity’s unity in diversity.

This week I found myself drawn to the music of Bob Marley—probably because when I hear the word “Babylon” I can’t help but think of songs like “Exodus,” in which Marley declares “We know where we're going, we know where we're from; we're leaving Babylon; we're going to our Father land;” or “Chant Down Babylon,” where Marley assures us that “With music, make we chant down Babylon; This music, make we chant down Babylon.” Marley saw his music, reggae music, as a divine gift for spreading the gospel of “One Love” not just in his native Jamaica, but throughout the world. It is music that expresses the bitterness of isolation and oppression that comes from racism and economic and imperial opportunism. “Babylon” is the watchword in his songs for what divides, what oppresses, what stands in the way of the love of God and the one love of humanity for one another.

But after considering the strange provisions of God in this scripture, I hear “Babylon” differently. I hear “babble on!” the commandment of God to embrace our linguistic, spatial, and ethnic differences, our national and international divisions—to love the diversity of God’s creative work in humankind.

By the wisdom of the world—the wisdom that builds towers and walled-in cities—division is something to be deepened; difference is something to be feared. In the wisdom of the world, the best we can hope for is a politics of compromise, and the worst we can fear is being annihilated because we don’t speak the right language, or believe the right things: live in the right place, or have the right skin tone. The human spirit, as Paul writes in First Corinthians, knows itself and its isolationist tendencies well. But the Spirit of God recognizes that we have been created for unity in diversity. That is why, when the Spirit of God came upon the first Apostles at Pentecost, it did not enable all to hear the gospel in one language, but rather allowed each to hear the good news of Christ in their own native tongue.

On Friday afternoon, I participated in a memorial service at the VA Medical Center honoring the “The Four Chaplains.” For those of you unfamiliar with this story, don’t feel bad—I was, until I got roped into speaking at the service. The Four Chaplains were George Fox, Alexander Goode, Clark Poling, and John Washington—a Methodist, a rabbi, a Dutch Reformed minister, and a Catholic priest. They served

together in World War II, and were aboard the US troop transport *Dorchester* on a secret mission to Greenland when the ship was struck by two torpedoes on the night of February 3rd, 1943. The crowded ship began to sink almost immediately into the frigid waters of the North Sea, and those who were not killed by the initial explosion scrambled to get on deck. Most arrived in a panic, realizing they had left their warm coats and life jackets behind. Caught between the sinking ship and the icy waters, the Four Chaplains jumped into action, preaching courage to the men and helping distribute what life jackets they could find. In the end, Fox, Goode, Poling, and Washington gave up their own life jackets. One survivor reported that the last time he saw them, the four men of different faiths were braced against a railing, arms interlocked, their heads bowed in prayer. Songs and prayers in English, Hebrew, and Latin commingled in the chilly night air, until the sea swallowed the *Dorchester*, taking the four chaplains and over 600 other souls down with it.

The Four Chaplains are credited with saving countless men's lives that night. Their story stands as a testament not just to their bravery, but, as the Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation notes, to the ideal of "unity without uniformity," and the value of "unconditional service to community, nation, and humanity without regard to race, religion, or creed."<sup>4</sup> It is a testament to the way that the providence of God and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit guides the best in us away from pride and anxiety to a love of difference and the embrace of otherness.

And it is by this spirit of unity in diversity that we gather at the table this morning. Communion is described in the Book of Common Worship as a "foretaste of the Heavenly banquet,"<sup>5</sup> in which all the different people that make up God's Beloved Community gather as one, to rejoice at the majesty of God's creation, to wonder at the mystery of Providence, and to be sustained from everlasting to everlasting by the love God has for us in Christ. As we gather at this table, people from different places, of different colors, ages, who speak different languages, we receive this strange provision of God in Christ—this gift of division, given in the unity of Christ's love, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may go out from this place to live, work, struggle, and strive for *God's* glory, rather than our own. For everyone born, there is a place at this table. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation, <<http://www.fourchaplains.org/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Prayers after Communion," *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), p. 76