

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
June 8th, 2025 - Pentecost Sunday
Title: "God's Antidote To Our Babels"
Text: Genesis 11:1-9; 12:1-3

Please turn with me this morning to the eleventh chapter of the Book of Genesis. As we turn, I must state that I am heavily indebted to J.I. Packer, who was a long-time professor at Regent College in Vancouver, for his insights on our text. Genesis, chapter 11, beginning at verse 1. Hear God's unchanging Word.
Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men 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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."
But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men 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. (Genesis 11:1-9, NIV)

And then, continuing on to chapter 12, beginning with verse 1.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.
"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3; NIV) This is God's Word.

The story of the Tower of Babel is the fourth and final story in the primeval history that the writer of Genesis has skillfully woven together. In the telling of these stories, the narrator shows the gathering avalanche of the increase of human sin while pointing out the continually widening chasm between man and God. God not only acts with judgement on these outbreaks of human sin, but He also meets man's sin with acts of grace. With Adam and Eve who want to be like God, God clothes their shame as an act of His grace. With Cain who murders his brother Abel, God not only judges him with a life of wandering upon the face of the earth, but also marks Cain to keep anyone from killing him. In a world gone berserk with violence and corruption, God saves Noah and his family and vows never again to flood the world on account of man's evil heart.

But when we come to the story of Babel, there is no significant word of grace as to God's future relationship with his rebellious human creatures. After the people attempt to set up themselves as the centre of reality and the universe, God brings judgement upon them by scattering the people and confusing their language. We are left with the question as to how God would continue to relate to his creatures. "Is God's relationship with the peoples of the earth now finally broken? Has God gotten so fed up with his people that the supply of grace has been fully exhausted? Has God, in anger, rejected his wayward creation forever?" Those are the unanswered questions with which we are left hanging at the end of chapter 11. Some people are misled by the fact that this story is told in a way that makes it sound like ancient folklore and legend rather than history. On that account, some reject this story as just an idle tale. But history from such early times was told in a half-poetic sort of prose. It made stories easier to remember and easier to tell.

What we are told here is how the great city of Babylon was first founded, and what its name really means. Babylonians used to explain the name as coming from the word babili, meaning the "gate of the gods"; but the writer tells us instead that

it is to be linked to the word babel which means "confusion." The gateway to man's gods is subtly portrayed as the gateway to confusion.

But what does this story of long ago have to say to us who are living in the 21st century? What can this ancient history tell us who live in a modern world? Actually, it offers to tell us much, since it tells us about the human condition. For what we see in this story is mirrored in daily life, not only among the nations, but also among ourselves as well. It pictures for us, very vividly, what we today would call the power game.

Look at the story once again. It describes a grandiose project undertaken by settlers in the Fertile Crescent (the plain of Shinar), living between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, following the great flood. The plan was to build a city with a huge skyscraper tower in the middle of it, a tower which the Babylonians called a ziggurat and which looked like the Mayan pyramids in Central America). The tower was to make a statement; it was to tell all who ever ventured near that this was a proud and strong community, not to be trifled with. Thus the building of the tower would help them to make a "name" - a reputation - for themselves.

We still do it: Paris has its Eiffel Tower and Washington D.C. has its Washington Monument. Each of them were the tallest freestanding buildings in the world when they were built. Of course, all Canadians can take pride in the fact that the Canadian National (CN) Tower was the tallest in the world for 32 years until 2009 when the Burj Khalifa in Dubai surpassed it. These towers are all gestures of national pride. But we need to face the fact that, as this story shows, in a fallen world national and civic pride is not, and never can be, an entirely innocent thing. Why not? Because it feeds into the power game, which is always to some extent vicious, as this first slice of Babylon's history is meant to make plain.

The story of Babel, which is a mirror of the modern world, shows us the purpose of human pride in the world today. That purpose is power. Pride, said Saint Augustine, was the original sin. Our first parents were betrayed into embracing the goal of being equal with God and independent of God. With the "wisdom" that Satan promised, Adam and Eve would now have power to get along without God, and that was what, in a moment of temptation, Satan got them to want. The passion for power, the craving to be on top and in charge, always starts, as it did in Eden, with a dislike of dependence in any form. Pride is the flame that sets this passion on fire.

We see it today in world politics. Every ethnic group wants its own independence, and will do anything and everything to get that power. And it's just not in the Balkans or in Africa; we've even seen it here in Canada in the 1970's. We see it as well in global economics. Every nation wants to be developed to the point of self-sufficiency and independent wealth - so that it can call the shots from a point of strength when dealing with the nations around them. We also see it in the way that individuals seek to manipulate and control and exploit other individuals in business, in the home, and yes - sad to say - even in some churches, and in every social unit under the sun. Playing the power game is standard behaviour on the part of our fallen race.

When power beckons and pride thrives, moral corners get cut and misconduct of one sort or another results. Athletes take forbidden steroids in order to win races; politicians follow prohibited courses in order to win elections. Need I say anything more than "SNC-Lavalin Affair" and "Canada Soccer Drone Spying Scandal" to make my point?

The Babel story also highlights another reality that results when pride, with its passion for power, is in the saddle. That reality is unrest, which in its extreme can produce paranoia. The power you have, the more you fear to lose it, the more you feel threatened by that possibility, and the more you are driven to hunt for more power, so as to protect what you have. Empire-builders cannot stop once they have started. John D. Rockefeller, the financial tycoon who was once the richest man in the world, when asked what he wanted in life now that he was a multi-millionaire, is reported to have replied, "Just a little bit more!" We see that pattern of paranoid unrest in the Babylonian's resolve to build their city "so that we may not be scattered over the face of the earth." Who was going to scatter them? They were the only ones there! But they were determined to increase the power they already had - just in case! So they began to build.

Another reality that pride produces is unrealism, which leads to their grandiose plans and foolhardiness. The plan was to build "a tower that reaches to the heavens." The scripture makes a point of showing this monumental undertaking of humanity to be so puny in the eyes of God, that God must come down from heaven to see what is going on. In the plain of Shinar the settlers had found clay for brick-making and sticky tar in open slime pits to bond the bricks together. But those

resources were not adequate. Imagine putting up a brick skyscraper without proper mortar to hold the bricks together! But their prideful daydreaming had led them beyond the bounds of realism. For the moment they felt nothing was beyond them; anything they desired, they could do - which is really the modern technological dream too. And so we come up with our unconquerable Maginot lines in eastern France prior to WW1 and impenetrable \$175 billion "Golden Dome" missile defense shield plans in the U.S. How up to date this old story is!

It would be all too easy to stop right here without asking some of the more penetrating questions that are suggested by our text. But we must ask them, if we are to see this story as the story of the human condition - our story. First, do you and do I embody the attitude of Babel? The Babel attitude, as we have seen, is one of pride, paranoia, and power. Pride says: "I must be big, bigger than these others." Paranoia says: "I am being threatened. I must protect my turf at all costs." Power, that illusion that dances so enticingly before us, urges: "Chase me! I'm worth catching. Now you're after me. That's good!"

Do you recognize any part of this attitude to life in yourself? Are you building your own Tower of Babel somewhere - with self-assertion, manipulation, or power-grabbing? What would those who know you best - your friends, your colleagues, your own family - say about you if asked that question? More importantly, what would God say? The origin of the Babel that surrounds us in the world outside us is the Babel that wants to operate in your heart and mine. We need not only be forgiven for indulging the Babel attitude, but we also need to be changed inside, so that the Babel attitude will no longer control us and Babel behaviour will no longer mark us.

And secondly, do you and I experience the curse of Babel? God inflicted his curse on Babel by direct action. As verse 8 states, and verse 9 repeats for emphasis, the settlers were scattered into isolation and loneliness, in which each was cut off from the rest both geographically and by the language barrier. Today, while we all live crowded together on this human anthill called earth, and while there are few language barriers that can't be overcome by interpreters or the latest technology on our smartphones like Amazon Translate or Google Translate, there nevertheless remains a loneliness and sense of isolation that even the crowds of Vancouver or Toronto or Kamloops can't overcome. The spirit and the curse of Babel infects human life even today.

I don't think that any of you would contradict me when I say that something of the bitterness of feeling isolated and alienated from those to whom we should be closest - colleagues, friends, spouse, children, parents - is known to all of us. Counsellors know that loneliness and isolation are great heartaches that have gripped Western culture as relationships everywhere seem to be set on self-destruct mode. And our culture's love affair with social media has not helped. At the beginning of this sermon, I pointed out that within the story of the Tower of Babel there is no word of grace. The writer leaves us hanging without any sign of hope, but only for a moment. For the missing word of grace comes to us in the call and election of Abraham in the next chapter. God's antidote to our Babels - to our confusion - begins to work itself out in history beginning with God's calling of Abraham. The builders of Babel were looking to make a great name for themselves. They were looking to call all the shots in their lives. But as the account of Abraham's call tells us, it is not in man's self-seeking, but in God's seeking of us, that we find true greatness. God tells Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2,3)

From our perspective on human history, we see that the fulfillment of this last clause - "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" - was ultimately fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, who was a direct descendant of Abraham. When we receive Christ into our lives as Saviour and Lord, letting God call the shots in our lives, letting Him be the center of life, he commits himself to be with us always, so that nevermore are we really alone, even in the darkest moments when we feel we are. Jesus promises never to leave us nor abandon us, and in so doing, the loneliness and isolation of the curse of Babel begins to be reversed.

How that promise was to be fulfilled was not made clear until the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. Language, which has separated and isolated people since the days of Babel, suddenly becomes the means whereby all people hear declared the mighty wonders of God. And out of that message a unity is built, not around some grandiose plan of man, but around the divine purpose of God.

That this is true is seen in the lifestyle of the infant church as pictured at the end of Acts chapter 2. "All the believers were together ... selling their possessions and goods; they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together ... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God ..." (Acts 2:44-47). This way of living was so counter-culture that those without God said in amazement, "See how these Christians love one another!" Life in fellowship with Christians completes the reversal of Babel that life in fellowship with Christ begins. But this will never happen until the spell of the curse of Babel is broken in our lives.

Some congregations have never grasped the fact that they have been called to be God's alternative to Babel - his alternative to the arrogant, manipulative, self-seeking, power-grabbing patterns of life and the confusion which follows, which is all that the secular world ever knows. But if we, the church of Jesus Christ, were to be more obviously God's alternative to Babel, being fellowships of faith and love and hope and help whose members work as hard in serving their Saviour as the builders of Babel once worked in service to their own pride, then, as in those early days of the church, the world would surely take notice.

Only in Jesus Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit do we find God's antidote to our babels. Only when we embrace God's plan will the confusion and alienation and loneliness of the curse of Babel be broken.. Will you then set yourself to live out consistently God's alternative to Babel in your home, in the fellowship of the church, and wherever else you go? This is the ultimate challenge of the Babel story to New Testament Christians. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the church." AMEN.