

SCATTERING AND GATHERING

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Text: Genesis 11:1-9

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 11:1-9

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.

The Pentecost Story, by the Rev. Mark Davis, (based on Acts 2:1-21)

'Twas the day of the fiftieth, the Sabbath of Sabbaths
when they were all gathered, an annual habit.
They saw their Lord buried then risen then taken;
they had had their hearts broken but now were awakened!
When all of a sudden there 'rose such a clatter,
the people in town came to see what's the matter.
The sound of strong winds, tongues dancing of fire,
the gathered ones filled with their true heart's desire.
With languages, idioms, dialects empowered,
they each found their tongue and they used it that hour.

And those who had gathered were astonished and wondered,
"What is this strange thing onto which we have blundered?
Are not these folks common, unlearned, unlettered,
how do they speak in the tongues of their betters?
We've traveled the world, in Parthia and Rome,
we call Cappadocia and Media our home,
Now these ignorantia are trying to say
that God works in this mysterious way?"
All of them wondered, but some of them thunk,
"These people are babbling because they are drunk!"

Then Peter stood up and had something to say,
"You know we're not drunk at this time of the day!"
This thing that is happ'ning, that makes us awake,
is that very thing that the prophet Joel spoke.

‘In days that are lasting, the true God declares,
I’ll make me a people, a people who dare,
We dare to see visions of justice one day.
We dare to have dreams like my man M.L.K.
We dare new equalities, not classes of old,
we’re benders of genders and breakers of codes!
This thing you see here, how we are behavin’,
is God being present in a world that needs savin.’”

Don’t sit there and wonder how commoners babbleth,
wonder instead that this is true Sabbath!
A people on fire, all Spirit-inspired,
living the true path that God has required,
Led by the one who was unjustly killed,
by hands with violence honed and skilled,
but then he was raised, ‘cause death has no might,
to hold down the one who does what is right.
He is the one who is breathing this breath,
whose Spirit’s unleashed and the world is refreshed.
The Word of the Lord... **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

No one knows who first was aware of the situation and made the first report, but word spread pretty fast. It went quickly through the lower ranks of seraphim and cherubim and was into the middle ranks of dominations, principalities and powers before anyone knew what was happening. So it was only natural that eventually the news was discussed and considered by the highest ranks of Heaven, the virtues, the angels and archangels, until finally it was decided that a report should be made before the very throne of the Lord God Almighty.

It was the archangel Michael who brought the news. Being commander of the armed forces, Michael was always interested in the latest intelligence reports from the occupied territories. After the appropriate praise and worship, Michael asked the Almighty God, “Lord, are you aware of what is going on down on the plains of Shinar?”

“I am omniscient and all knowing,” replied the Lord God. “Of course I am aware of all that is going on. But Shinar is so very, very far away, that sometimes the particular details slip by me. Do you have something you wish to report, Michael?”

“Yes, Lord,” the archangel replied humbly. “The humans are building something... a tower, actually. You might want to check it out for yourself. We believe it could have some significance.”

“Well, if you say so, Michael,” the Lord God answered. “Let us go and see what these beloved little creatures of mine are up to now. Come along.” And in an instant they were away from the throne of Heaven and down on an open plain beside a wide river. There was a scurry of activity going on, and the Great Lord God himself, the King of the Universe, bent down to take a closer look and to carefully scrutinize what exactly was going on. For a few minutes he studied the structure the humans were so furiously working on. Then he straightened up and said to Michael, “Tell me. Do the humans regard this thing they are building as large and significant?”

“Yes, Lord,” Michael responded. “It is the largest, tallest thing they have ever done. They are extremely proud of it. In fact, they think it reaches almost up to heaven. That’s their goal. They are trying to build a tower that

reaches up to heaven and they think they are almost to your doorstep. That is why we wanted to bring the situation to your attention.”

At this the Lord God Almighty began to grin and then smile. Then he could not hold it in any longer. He started to chuckle and then began to laugh outright, a deep thunderous laugh that echoed from one end of creation to the other. Lowly seraphim taking care of supernovas billions of light years away looked up from their work and wondered what was going on. Finally, the Lord God calmed down and wiped a tear from his eye.

“Oh my!” he exclaimed. “What funny little creatures these humans are! Maybe that is why I love them so. What will they think of next? Actually, I shouldn’t be laughing, that is a rather serious question: what will they think of next? Oh Michael, they are liable to get themselves into serious trouble. I suppose I had better do something before it is too late.”

So that is why the next morning when all the workers arrived on the job, they encountered some problems unlike anything they had ever dealt with before. When one worker said “Good morning,” to another it sounded like “Buenos dias.” And when the second worker tried to say “Hello” to someone else it sounded like “Konichiwa.” When one of the foreman gave an order for more bricks on the upper level, they brought him some pitch. When someone hollered they needed another wheelbarrow, a bystander thought he was being rude and tried to punch him in the nose. In less than an hour there was total chaos from the top of the tower to the plain below. Gradually people sorted themselves out into tiny groups who could understand each other. But there was no way to get organized, no way to get anything done. So they began to scatter. Those who spoke Yuraba and Swahili headed off to the southwest. Those who spoke Hindi, Tagalog and Cantonese headed off to the east. And those who spoke Gaelic, Flemish and Ukranian headed off to the north and west. Over the years the heavy rains pounded those bricks back into silt and the mighty tower that they though would reach to heaven vanished without a trace.

I hope you will forgive the liberties I have taken with this story. What I was trying to do was to give you some of the flavor of this story as it is told in the original Hebrew. This is a story full of irony, if not plain humor. For instance, the text makes a point of saying that these tower builders on the plains of Shinar used bricks and bitumen, or pitch actually, for their building materials. Now you might shrug and think, “So what?”, but in ancient Israel the most common and most durable building material was stone and mortar. Bricks and pitch were regarded as inferior materials suitable for only rough temporary shelters. Clay bricks might be used for animal shelters or slaves’ quarters, but never for something important like a palace or a temple.

These tower builders say, “Let’s not allow ourselves to be scattered. Let us make a name for ourselves and do something that will impress everyone. Why, if we all pull together, we can even impress God. But the original readers of this story would not have been impressed, for they were using second rate materials.

But that is not the most ironic part of this story. They want to build this tower with its top in the heavens, but it says that “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built...” The verb translated as “came down” has the meaning in Hebrew of descending from a great height, or going down a long distance. It is used in a number of places in the Psalms to describe going down into the grave or even descending into Hell.

The writer of this story is trying to show just how far off these tower builders were. They thought they were reaching up to the heavens, accomplishing something great and wonderful. Yet, the Lord God had to make an effort, has to come all the way down from the high throne of heaven, down below the clouds, down below the mountains, all the way down to the plain of Shinar to get a glimpse of what they were doing. What was huge in their eyes was microscopic in God’s eyes. So, no, God was not impressed in the slightest and the sheer hubris of these builders made them appear ridiculous.

Now while this is an ancient story, it has some applications that are very contemporary. Over the years I have encountered many tower builders. “You know, pastor,” they say. “I may not have been the most religious person, but I do believe in God. And I think you can just as easily worship God in a forest or on a lake fishing or on a golf course, as you can in a church building. I have always tried to do my best. I work hard and provide for my family. I am faithful to my spouse. I raised my kids and they seem to be all right. I don’t drink or gamble or anything like that. I give what I can to charities. I do what I can to help others. I think I am basically a good person. This all ought to count for something.”

They have been building their towers brick by brick. “I believe in God.” There’s a brick. “I work hard.” Another brick. “I am a good spouse and a good parent.” Another brick. “I try to help people when I can.” Still another. “I am basically a good person.” And another. Until finally we get to, “This all ought to count for something.” Do you see what they are saying? “I have gathered all this good stuff together that ought to count for something. I just know God is going to be impressed with all that I have done.”

We might smile and scoff at the ancient tower builders in Genesis, but contemporary tower builders are maybe not so funny. They work hard and try their best, proud of their accomplishments. They think they have it all under control and will not be scattered. But God is not any more impressed with modern tower builders than he was with ancient ones. The irony is that the more we try to do things on our own, the more we think we can impress God, the further we push ourselves away from God. Sometimes if we try to build ourselves up too far, God will scatter our efforts, and all those bricks we have stacked up crumble into dust.

Today is Pentecost. It is the celebration of the arrival of the Holy Spirit upon the early church. We remember this important day when God’s Spirit came to be with us. As we study the whole of scripture we discover again and again just how much God does indeed want to be with us. We do not have to build ourselves up and impress God. God will come to us. God comes to us in creation, on Mt. Sinai with Moses, through the prophets of old, but most importantly, God comes to us in Christ Jesus. If we insist on, in our pride, building ourselves up and doing things our own way, then there may be times when God will come to scatter our efforts as was done at Babel. But that is not what God wants to do. God’s deepest desire is to gather his own together, as at Pentecost. On that day the scattering of Babel was reversed, for the apostles, empowered by the Spirit, were able to speak in many languages and one unifying message was heard.

We celebrate Pentecost on this one Sunday out of the year to remember that particular day. But the truth is that the unifying Spirit of Pentecost continues to be with us and to work among us on the other 364 days. This last week there were celebrations connected with the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the invasion of the Allied Forces on the beaches of Normandy, that was the turning point of World War II. It was a time of Babel, when humanity was scattered as the results of the rise of fascism. But as I watched the coverage this week, it reminded me of a story my Uncle Cliff liked to tell; a story of Pentecost, a story of the Spirit coming when not expected.

Uncle Cliff was in the 3rd Army, serving under General George Patton with his drive through France and Germany. Towards the end of the war they were deep into Germany, systematically going from town to town. They would drive out whatever resistance they found and then try to establish a makeshift government answerable to the Allied Forces.

They came to one tiny village. All the young people were gone. The people left were old and weary. They found a man who was the burgermeister, sort of like the mayor, and they began to work with him to reestablish what the war had left in ruins. In the center of the town there was a little church. It was in pretty bad shape, windows and doors boarded up from years before when the Nazi government closed down the churches. My uncle and a few others in his unit asked their commanding officer for permission to help the people open their church.

Permission was granted and at first it was just a handful of GI's and the burgermeister who began to work. But soon word spread and more and more people showed up. Women with brooms and mops. Men with tools to repair broken windows and falling plaster. People stopped working on their homes and farms to work on the church. Some of the men began working on the old pipe organ and, while it definitely needed a tuning, eventually it was producing music.

Sunday rolled around and it was decided they should have a church service. There was not pastor so the burgermeister agreed to lead the service. Uncle Cliff and his buddies decided they would like to attend, so they showed up at the door of the church in full combat gear. For a moment things were tense. After all the war was still going on. They were enemies. It was entirely possible that recently they had been engaged in a bitter fight with the very sons of these townspeople. Finally, the burgermeister came and talked to the GI's. Yes, they could come in for the service, but would they please leave their weapons outside?

Now, it was a violation of army regulations for a soldier to lay aside his weapons during a time of war. But, even more, Uncle Cliff said that for months they had been carrying their rifles like they were an extension of themselves, part of their own bodies. What were they to do? They talked it over and decided to defy the army regulations. One of them remained outside, guarding the pile of rifles and pistols, while the rest went inside.

My uncle said this was a service unlike anything he had ever experienced before, and he never experienced anything like it for the rest of his life. An old woman sat at the organ and started playing some tunes from a battered old hymnal. The people began singing, timidly at first, but gradually with more and more enthusiasm. The words were in German, but the GI's recognized the tunes... Joyful, joyful, we adore thee... A mighty fortress is our God... Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty... The singing grew with the townsfolk singing in German and the GI's singing in English. After the singing the burgermeister brought out a Bible. There were a few others, Bibles that had been hidden for years in attics, closets and cupboards. My uncle and his buddies did not understand a word of what was being said until the end when the townspeople started to pray in unison, but then paused, urging the GI's to join in English, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... When they all said "Amen" and looked up, everyone was crying, including the tough, combat hardened GI's. Then they all started hugging each other and slapping each other on the back.

I heard Uncle Cliff tell this story a number times and each time when he came to this part, he had to stop and get his emotions under control. After a few moments, he would say quietly, "Somehow, God's Spirit was there... The Spirit was really there..."

There is no doubt in my mind, that the Holy Spirit was there. The Spirit gathers us together, across language barriers, across political lines, across national boundaries, across great divides of war, hatred, bloodshed and sorrow. The Spirit is uncontrollable and unpredictable and powerful beyond our imagination. By the power of the Spirit, without any effort on our part, we find ourselves gathered together in the very presence of God. That is worth celebrating, every single day, year in and year out.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.