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“A New View of the Tower”

Genesis 11:1-9

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This is Throwback Sunday. This past summer, Rachel, Elizabeth and I preached sermons based on passages from Genesis. With only so many Sundays to work with, we couldn't cover the whole book. One story we didn't get to was the Tower of Babel. I want to talk about the tower because, thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, I have a different view.

The story of the tower in chapter 11 is set in contrast to the story of the flood in chapters 7-9. I'll summarize those three chapters in one paragraph.

In the days of Noah, there is no stable ruler and the world is in lasting and violent chaos. Families are at war with each other (either us or them) and God gets fed up. God unleashes a massive devastation – that's the judgement. But God also throws a lifeline of mercy to the human race. A remnant – Noah's family and an animal menagerie- are spared. For those who celebrate diversity in and of itself, this story is a warning. Diversity without order leads to chaos and violence.

Two chapters later, we come to the story of the Tower. Let's listen to that story now:
Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.” ⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.” ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ 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 way this story is often explained is to say that what we have here is a repeat of the same sin of chapter 1. Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because they wanted to be like gods. Isn't that what these people are trying to do in building a tower? Don't they want to reach and overthrow heaven so they can be their own gods? God

won't have it and thwarts their effort by placing the ultimate virus in the human operating system. He confuses their language. They can't talk to each other and the building of the city and tower comes to an immediate halt. Just as the rainbow is a sign of God's mercy, that we speak different languages is a sign of human sin.

I think that interpretation misses the mark. That we speak different languages is not a sin, nor is God threatened by this attempt to reach and breach heaven's walls.

This story has much to say to us today, but to hear it clearly, it would help to hear the story as it would have been heard by those who first heard Genesis as one book. I believe that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – the written Torah – emerged as one unified book in the time of Exile. The Genesis stories were brought together and told in a certain way to say something important to those whose ancestors inherited a land, became a nation, and then were defeated by an empire and now live as minority communities under foreign rule.

How would the story of the Tower of Babel be heard by those exiles? When the exiles hear a story about building the highest possible tower, they would think immediately of a pyramid. With the available technology of stone, brick, and mortar, the pyramid is the highest structure that can be built and still be stable.

Remarkably stable. Egypt has been hit by major earthquakes over the centuries resulting in terrible damage, but the pyramids still stand. Because of its structure – the ratio of base to height – the pyramid is far more stable than a dome or a cube.

Do the math. Nature has. If you continuously dump dirt in one spot, as the pile grows higher and higher, it naturally forms a pyramid, always reaching a height that is sustained by an ever widening base.

And that is why, in ancient Egypt, pharaohs chose to build pyramids as the means to build memorials to their power. I would love to see the Great Pyramid of Giza, the oldest of the seven wonders of the world. It is largely intact from when it was built in 2560 BC. It stands about 75 stories high. I know that might seem small in New York City or Chicago, but I can't imagine how high that must be when out in the middle of the desert.¹

So, the Tower is built; brick on brick, layer by layer; with increasingly narrowing results. Let's say it starts to achieve the height of the Great Pyramid of Giza, with a height that is dizzying for those on the ground looking up.

Now re-read verse 5: "The Lord came down to see the city and tower..." Hear that verse for the ridicule intended. The joke in the narrative is that the structure is so puny, God has to come down to see it. Needless to say, God is not in the least bit threatened by this attempt to reach the heavens. Whatever else this story is about, it is not about God acting in God's own self-defense.

Which leaves us with a question: what is so wrong about what the people are doing? Especially after the story of Noah's flood where everyone was doing their own thing with resulting chaos, what is wrong with everyone now being united . . . speaking the same language For once, building something and not destroying something... a project pulling everyone together creating unity? Is it so bad getting everyone on the same page?

Only what are those exiles hearing. Their ancient ancestors were among the slaves who labored to build the massive pyramids in Egypt. It was the Pharaoh's agenda that there be only one

¹ It actually sits between two other pyramids, but I didn't want to get too complicated in the sermon.

people with only one god . . . himself. It was the Pharaoh's objective to erase the identity, and thus the dignity, of the Hebrews as a separate people.

The exiles in Babylon have that ancient memory, and they have another more recent one. They are descendants of the two tribes of Judah who were defeated by the Babylonian Empire. 100 years before their defeat, the ten tribes of Israel were defeated by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were much more brutal and effective than either the Egyptians before them or the Babylonians after them in erasing the identity of those they conquered. It began with genocide where they simply killed many of power and influence, both political and religious, so the people lost the leaders to unite them. Then they scattered people so they could not remain in cohesive communities.

And they did one more thing which is reflected in an inscription quoting the Assyrian emperor Saragon II: "Populations of the four quarters of the world with strange tongues and incomparable speech . . . whom I had taken as booty... I caused to accept a single voice." The Assyrians required conquered peoples to speak only in the Assyrian tongue. So did the Egyptians before them.

Imagine a foreign power insisting that you cannot tell loved ones you love them with English, your native tongue. You cannot tell your stories, express your ideas, buy your food, have an argument, whisper sweet nothings, or even pray to God in public in the language you learned from infancy. This has been the imposition imposed upon people time and time again to rob them of their national, family, and personal identity . . . and thus their dignity. Since language is the center of what it means to be a people, the story is really about one culture eliminating other cultures.

For those who might think that this story explains how different languages began, it might be helpful now to tell you that in chapter 10 – the chapter that separates the story of the flood and the tower – all the people didn't speak the same language. Chapter 10 tells us that the people were divided into 70 nations, each speaking their own language.² That everyone is speaking the same language when the tower is being built *is not natural*. Something *unnatural* has been imposed. This unity is not beautiful but something enforced.

This is a story about an empire and its slaves. If the story of the flood is about diversity without order, the story of the tower is about order without diversity. Rabbi Sacks says, "Any attempt to eliminate difference by imposing a single culture, religious or secular, on all, (will lead to) tyranny and oppression."³ "The unity of God asks us to respect the stranger, the outsider, the alien, because even though he or she is not in our image – their ethnicity, faith, or culture is not ours - nonetheless they are in God's image."⁴ "The unity of God can co-exist with the diversity of humankind."⁵

The story of the Tower should make us think more than twice about our own Tower-building fantasies, the fantasies that imagine that if we can just get everyone to think or act exactly

² *Note in God's Name*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, p. 192.

³ *Ibid*, p. 194.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 195.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 194.

alike then we can solve the problems of the world. The fantasies are both liberal and conservative, they can have to do with unity and diversity, with desires for liberty and desires for equality:

- Will we ever come up with a politically correct language and code that everyone can adhere to and not offend or take offense?
- Will spreading democracy around the world eliminate bad government and end wars? Will spreading free trade? Or socialist ideals?
- If one political party in this country would just disappear and we just had one – the right one – would this country finally get on the right track?
- Shouldn't all denominations be made into just one church?
- Shouldn't all faiths unite so that we can become one people?
- Shouldn't everyone just listen to me and do what I say?

No. The Tower of Babel story undercuts every "Ism" fantasy. When we look at the pyramids, we should at least in our awe be reminded of that. And then, when we look at the heavens that we sometimes foolishly try to reach, let's consider instead the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars that God has established, and then be grateful that while our pitiful and puny tower-building will always come to naught, our many lives and cultures, however diverse, are finally in the hands of the God who created it all; the God of justice, mercy, and peace.

Come Pentecost, let's remember that when the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, the miracle is not that everyone in Jerusalem speaks with one tongue, but that the disciples learn to speak Gospel news of love, justice, and mercy in every tongue; in every culture.

In the end, let's find our true dignity in serving not the Pharaohs among us and the Pharaoh within each of us, but the God whose love is for all of us.