

December 20, 2015 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Revelation 7:9–17 (Genesis 11:1–9)

TITLE: Advent Bookends: Babel & Harmony

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." How true those words sound. Yet they were not spoken by a patient lying on Sigmund Freud's couch nor part of a transcript from a call-in show seeking advice from a radio personality. They were written by the apostle Paul almost 2000 years ago. In Romans 7, he captures the moral tension we all have felt—*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

We can look at the opening stories found in the book of Genesis and consider them to be myths arising from the dawn of civilization to answer fundamental questions about life: Where did we come from? Has life always been marked by violence? Why do we speak so many different languages? But this approach misses the real spiritual wisdom contained in the ancient words of Genesis. The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the Tower of Babel are not quaint myths from the Bronze Age; they delineate the ways we rebel against the true design of the universe—God's design of the universe. We were created to live in relationship with God, but like Adam and Eve, we reject that relationship. We were created to live in harmony, but like Cain, we murder our brothers. We were created to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, but like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we want to consolidate power in one place and make a name for ourselves that will replace the name of the Lord on our lips. As the apostle Paul said, *I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched one that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* To which comes the answer of praise: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7) The questions raised by the first book of the bible have their answers in the gospels and the good news found in Revelation, the last book of the bible.

God's plan for the earth basically had two parts to it. Humankind was to prosper and multiply over the face of the earth (Genesis 2:28: *God blessed them and said 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and have dominion over it).* And humankind was to serve the Lord completely (Deuteronomy 6:5: *Hear O Israel: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* Exodus 20, the first commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me.*) Pretty straightforward – go forth and multiply, and worship the Lord. Yet after the Garden of Eden, after Cain and Abel, after Noah and the flood and the doors of the ark were finally opened and God promised never again to destroy all life on earth—the remnant people were sent out once more to do those two things: populate the land and worship the Lord. But then comes the Tower of Babel. The people migrated east, stopped, and said to one another, "Let's make bricks. Let's build a city. Let's build a tower with its top in the heavens. Let's make a name for ourselves!"

I imagine all the angels in heaven, watching this unfold, smacking their foreheads and saying “Oy vey!” The one thing contrary to their own best interests is the exact thing the people do. “Go forth to love and serve the Lord” was the command; “Let’s stop here and make a name for ourselves” was the response. Now, lest we believe this inclination was only true of our ancient ancestors, I recall a prideful British boast that “the sun never sets upon the British Empire.” I recall a German boast that “the Third Reich would last a thousand years.” And have not American voices described our nation as a “city set upon a hill,” one that is a world power without having to always follow the world’s rules? Was it not hubris, false pride, that led to the belief that once we began bombing Iraq, we would be “greeted as liberators” (Dick Cheney, March 2003)? Is it not hubris that, unlike the rest of the United Nations, the United States refuses to sign the Rome Statute on the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol on Global Warming, the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

What is at stake here are two fundamental inclinations—a desire to consolidate power and “make a name for ourselves” versus a desire to share power and resources and live as diverse people in different lands with different gifts, yet faithful to our God and Creator. If that second option feels utopian and dangerously naïve, it is only because the Tower of Babel perspective is still such a dominant part of our human experience. But our faith calls us to follow a different path. When our ancestors wanted to build a tower that they believed reached into the heavens, the next verse suggests that this tower was so insignificant that God actually had to come down to see this feeble mortal creation. And when the people were speaking one language, it was a language of vanity and pride and Jim Crow-type segregation. So God chose to break up the power of that false unified voice. Theologian Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that when God says, “Let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand one another’s speech,” the Hebrew word used for “understand” is the old word “shema,” which actually means “to hear.” God disrupts the hearing of this false language of pride and then sends the people back into the world— where they were supposed to be in the first place. God’s response to the Tower of Babel is less a punishment and more like a correction—which is always how God works.

Remember the two core tenets of God’s plan—we are to populate the earth and worship our Creator. We were never designed to be uniform in our language, in our ethnicity, in our culture; we were only designed to be uniform in the sincere desire to worship the God we have come to know. Now, it’s a whole different sermon to talk about how this works out regarding different religions all seeking to worship God; but let’s assume that God wants us all to play nicely in the sandbox and work hard at doing what our own tradition requires before we throw stones at other faiths.

So, right after the story of the Tower of Babel and the scattering of the nations comes the story of Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 12, God says to them, *I will bless you and make of you a great nation [that] all the families of the earth shall be blessed...and your descendants shall be as the sand by the sea.* (Genesis 12:2-3, 22:17). To childless Abraham and Sarah is born Isaac and God's promise began to be fulfilled. From Isaac came Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, Moses and the Hebrew people of God's law, the kingdom of David, seasons of prosperity and of decline, times of self-rule and centuries of domination by other nations. But again and again through the centuries, the message of Babel returned: Let's build a tower, a kingdom; let's speak one language of the sword, of power; let's make a name for ourselves.

During one of those seasons, during the Roman Empire, God came down to earth again. To a young childless girl came a promise of a son to be born. As opposed to the language of Babel, Mary had the ability to "shema", to "hear" what God had spoken. So she said, *"Here am I; let it be with me according to your word."* And when she visited Elizabeth she sang a hymn of joy, telling how God is keeping the promise made to Abraham long ago; the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up. When her child was born, he was named Jesus—God Saves—and Immanuel—God with us. He was worshiped by local shepherds and magi from distant lands. He was the Savior of the world.

In time, after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the early church would be guided by the Holy Spirit to tell Christ's story on Pentecost. And on that day, the wrong turn of the Tower of Babel would finally be re-directed onto the right path of God's highway. On Pentecost, the people from all the surrounding lands with all their different languages heard the disciples speaking to them in their own tongues. The problem was never the different languages; the problem was what was being said in those languages. Peter preached a sermon of inclusive diversity. He said, *"This promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away"* (Acts 2:39). Scripture says that awe came upon the crowd and they came together to praise God and have the goodwill of all the people (2:47).

That same spirit is depicted again in the book of Revelation, when John has a vision of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." (Rev 7:9) As they gather before God, they don't lose their diversity; they don't revert back to the single language of Babel. What they share is a common focus for their faith. No longer is it "let us make a name for ourselves." Now it is "Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might be to our God forever and ever." In place of a false Babel there is finally harmony—different voices, words, histories, contexts coming together harmoniously to praise God our Creator.

Towers of Babel babble a false message of pride, domination and fear of the other. Hearts of faith sing songs of harmony, blending who they are, where

they've come from, and how they express that, into a new melody of praise. Remember what the angels said to the shepherds long ago: *We bring you good news of great joy for all the people*. That is part of the joyful commandment for us of this season: Sing—together—to the Lord.

AMEN