

October 3, 2021 (World Communion Sunday) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: Genesis 11:1-9

TITLE: Intervals of Faith (m2): Dissonant, Different Words

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The minor 2nd is the smallest interval possible—two notes a half-step apart. Play them in a scale and they sound OK next to one another. Play them at the same time and they sound harsh, grating, like they're a mistake. Shouldn't all intervals make beautiful sounds? Why do we have dissonant intervals like the minor 2nd? If all sounds were only the ones I like, the music I'm comfortable with, wouldn't things be better? That strikes me as a very flawed and human question.

I've paired this discussion of the minor 2nd interval with the story of the Tower of Babel. We usually read that story on Pentecost Sunday. Here's how the Tower of Babel story is usually described. Long ago people were clustered together in a city, speaking one language and unified by one thought: *Let us make a name for ourselves by building a tower up to the heavens.* God saw this tower and grew angry at the people's pride, so God scattered them over the face of the earth and gave them lots of different languages to speak, a reality still exists today. That's the neat, tidy interpretation of this ancient story—but I'm afraid it is a wrong interpretation. The minor 2nd interval can help us discover the correct interpretation, but first I want to tell you about another moment in history. Let me share with you about the famous Chinese treasure fleets of the 15th century.

In the early 1400s, China had a huge fleet of ships for exploring the world – by some estimates as many as 3500 ships. As a comparison, the U.S. Navy is currently made up of only 430 ships. Under their famed admiral Zheng He, between 1405 and 1433, this treasure fleet sailed westward to Arabia and on to the east coast of Africa, controlling the seas with huge ships up to 400 feet long and crews numbering in the thousands. They brought back incredible riches to Ming Dynasty China, but then the Chinese leadership changed. Suddenly those in power became afraid of the growing merchant class, a group of people considered the lowest rung in the Confucian social order. This fear led the Chinese rulers to look inward, to stop all sea exploration and literally to burn or let rot their entire fleet of ships. As fate would have it, sixty years later a group of puny Portuguese ships captained by Vasco da Gama found a route from the West going around Africa to the Indies, and a different trio of tiny ships led by Columbus made their way to the Americas. Suddenly the control of the seas passed from Chinese hands to European hands and the history of civilization went in a whole new direction.

There are similarities between the fears of the 15th century Chinese leaders and those described in the bible story about the leaders of the city of Babel. In the days of Babel, nomadic people were starting to settle down. They now had bricks and mortar to build permanent homes for themselves. They could plant fields, domesticate animals, and live in towns, even great cities, for the first time in history. They wanted this way of life to last, to make a name for themselves and be remembered. And yes, a thirst for power and a large dose of human vanity was part of their reasoning. But like the Chinese, who

had the world's oceans at their disposal but ended up burning their ships and retreating behind their borders, the people of Babel were afraid of the world around them. Scripture says *they were afraid of being scattered abroad over the face of the earth*. So they put up a wall, built a tower, and turned their back on God's world.

I think this is the real point of the Tower of Babel story. Humans want to stick close together with our own tribe, our own people, our own language group, our own rules and religion and social order. Yet God is the God of all the earth, of all people, all language groups and nation-states—and God wants us to live as one global, human family. From the beginning of the bible, that focus has been clear. In the first creation story, God said “*Let us make humankind in our image...and God blessed them and said ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’*” (Gen 1:26, 29). At the end of the Noah story, when the ark was opened at last, God sent them all, humans and animals alike, out into the world to be fruitful and multiply on the earth (Gen 8:17). Over and over again, that commandment is given by God. But look what happened in Babel. The people stopped in one place and wanted to make their own rules – to make a name for themselves instead of living into the name they'd been given: children of God, citizens of the earth.

This is both an ancient and a modern instinct. A self-centered anxiety led the Chinese to destroy their treasure fleets; led Britain to boast of an empire on which the sun never sets, and led Hitler to proclaim a thousand-year Reich. It led Americans to believe it was ethical to own some people and to erect walls to keep others out. Throughout human history, we have erected towers of power, wealth, and vanity—seeing all others as a threat, as a dissonance to be silenced.

In the tower of Babel story, God came down to earth and then scattered the people. We tell this story as if God did all that as a punishment, but God always acts for a purpose – acting not out of anger, but out of love and desiring to set things right. From the dawn of creation, God's intent was for people to know their Creator and go forth to multiply over the earth. In the New Testament, we're told that God is like a sower who scatters seed over lots of different soils, generously, abundantly, sowing seeds everywhere. Maybe the one language that everyone spoke in Babel was a language that was self-focused, that only valued power, wealth, and human glory. Maybe by being scattered over the lands and given different languages by God, the people would stop focusing on their own tower and look at the God-given beauty and diversity present all around them in this world. Maybe they'd discover the humility that comes from having to learn someone else's language as well as the joy that finds commonality in those we'd thought of only as strangers. Maybe they'd glimpse how this unity amid diversity is part of God's eternal plan and ever-present love. Like a minor 2nd note only a half-step away, maybe they'd stop confusing difference with dissonance.

The church lectionary assigns specific passages from the bible to be read on each Sunday of the year. The Tower of Babel story is always paired with the story of Pentecost, but I think this combination does the former story a disservice. Yes, Babel ends with people babbling away in different languages while Pentecost appears to be a reversal of that situation through the miracle of having the disciples pour out into the

streets of Jerusalem, telling the story of Jesus' resurrection in the foreign languages of the visitors they encountered that day.

But maybe the Tower of Babel story is best read on World Communion Sunday. What is today about? It is a time to imagine people literally the world over gathering for worship and prayer, singing and sharing a common meal – a sacrament where Christ is both the host and the substance shared. The settings for these global services are as different as you can imagine: huts and houses, chapels and cathedrals. The bread and juice shared will neither look nor taste all the same. The songs sung will not use the same harmonies; the prayers spoken will be offered in hundreds of different languages using (to our ears) strange-sounding words. Yet this scattered, sacred, unified witness of World Communion Sunday is part of God's plan. *“Be fruitful and multiply and go forth even to the ends of the earth, says the Lord of heaven and earth.”*

The dissonance of two notes in close proximity to one another does not change the fact that both are part of the same scale and both are needed to make beautiful melodies. The same is true of us, who live in close proximity to so many yet too often are still afraid of being scattered—as if there were any place we could go in the world where God might not be found.

So instead of answers, let me leave you with these questions:

Why have I believed that my words, my culture, my faith is the one that must be protected? What is God's purpose in creating a world of so many people and cultures? And how might I live to honor what the Lord intends for me and for all God's children?

AMEN