We come to Part 3 in this series on Great Bible Stories from the Book of Genesis, a book designed to teach us how everything began, where this all started, how we got to the wonder AND the mess we’re in. Oh, and by the way, to point to where God is in the midst of it all.

Today—The Tower of Babel. If we know this story, either from our Sunday School days or from movies and books based on its themes, I bet most of us have some pretty negative associations with this old story. But as you probably won’t be surprised to hear ME say, let me remind us all of the old saw that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” What little knowledge we have of this story, or think we have, may in fact be preventing us from seeing its real meaning and power for us today and even sending us down the wrong path.

Most of us were taught that this is a story about sin, about pride, about human hubris. We may even have heard interpretations that focus on the sinful things that happen when humans build cities or the destructive power in human technologies. Even the name “Babel” has been translated into English as “babble” and means, according to one popular dictionary: “a confused sound of voices”, “a scene of noise and confusion”, “bedlam, din, clamor, disorder, pandemonium, chaos, tumult, turmoil and commotion.” My heavens. Nothing good there.

Let’s take another look and review this series and then this story from the beginning. Story #1: God creates everything and calls it good and scatters humans across the face of the earth to be fruitful and multiply. Story #2. God gets angry at the violent ways of humankind, tells Noah to build the ark, sends the flood waters to wash everything clean, and starts over with the new arc of the rainbow covenant once again embracing all creation, all humankind, with a promise to never again send down destruction upon it all. Again God commands Noah and his family to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” echoing God’s original plan. Spread out, God says, settle in different places, create human civilization. And they do. Genesis Chapter 10 lists sets of genealogies of Noah’s sons, each getting to the place of their own land or territory and their own language.

Now, story #3, today’s story. Some descendants of Noah settle in the plane of Shinar. They decide to build a city and a tower. They want to give up their nomadic life and settle down. They want to stay together as an extended family, tiring perhaps of God’s command to scatter across the face of the earth. No thank you, God. Enough of that. We’re staying put, translated as “they want to make a name for themselves.”

But our common understandings of what happens next have been called the “pride and punishment” interpretation of the story. The traditional interpretation of this story goes something like this: God is apparently surprised and displeased by what he sees going on. Not part of the plan. They think they can build a tower right up to heaven itself and make themselves like God. Oh, the pride, the sin, the hubris. God shows them by destroying their great tower and scattering them across the face of the earth, each speaking a different language so that they cannot communicate with one another and be about such self-serving schemes ever again.

But I’ve come to think, encouraged by some of the wonderful scholars of our day, that a different reading of this text is possible. Not only possible, but important. Important to the issues and the challenges we face in our world today. For what if the story is about something else? As scholarship is suggesting, there is nothing in the text itself that points to the “pride and punishment” interpretations.

Instead, this is a story that explains the origins of the diversity in those genealogies. The problem God sees when God sees Babel is not the tower or the city but the fact that God’s people have suddenly refused to scatter. They have chosen to stay together and consolidate into one community, one culture, one language. The problem is not the sin of pride, but the sin of disobedience and the willful ignoring of God’s command. Their sin is in their attempt to create and preserve homogeneity.
So what does God do? Our translation says that God “confused” their languages. But that word “confuses” can also be translated as “mixes” or “mixes together”, like when a recipe calls for mixing the ingredients together. All the negative connotations of “confusion” fall away and the story becomes simply an explanation of why God wants there to be a diversity of language and culture. God intends diversity and the multiplicity of languages and cultures that come from God’s people scattered across the face of the earth.

You see where this goes? It’s wondrous and beautiful. The story of Babel becomes a gift. So the question today to us is: is all this diversity a problem or gift? A barrier or an opportunity?

I think that in these days, we might answer: it’s both. Our ability to communicate with one another is, in many ways, seriously limited and distorted. We are divided in so many ways by our inability to communicate with one another, to really listen deeply and understand not only someone else’s words but their heart. Where are they coming from, we might ask? How is it that they see the world so differently than I do?

Think of all the barriers to understanding we need to face into as we work for racial justice in our land. Just a few examples…our sense of opportunities of advancement in life or of dead ends, glass ceilings, and closed doors of all kinds…our views of police and their role in our communities and schools…our sense of personal safety as we move about our neighborhoods and communities…the meaning of our own past as a nation and the merits of remedies to address past wrongs…all these matters are enormously difficult, painful, and challenging. And so often we seem to just be talking right past one another, not even wanting to hear or understand.

And on top of all that in these days, the pandemic and how to address it….open the schools or keep children at home? Mandated wearing of masks or personal choice? The push to “get back to normal” vs. the determination to stay safe at home?

Talking past one another…living in different worlds, really, not hearing, not listening, and most seriously—not sharing a conviction to do better, to build relationships, to walk in the other’s shoes long enough to see the world as they do so that we can honestly talk.

So now, especially in these times of physical distancing, how do we connect across time and context and personal histories? How do we bring our full loving faithful selves into the difficult, fraught, holy places where lives overlap and stories converge and hearts and minds begin to create common ground? How do we overcome fear and apprehension to embrace curiosity, joy, and hope?

It’s all about living into the call, the commandment, to love one another, isn’t it? This is our vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ. This is our spiritual work: to care about the well-being of others as much as we care about our own. We need to dig deeper, study, think and reflect, challenge our assumptions, commit to seeing the face of God in one another and wonder what each person teaches us about the Creator of it all. We need to learn how to build bridges, not barriers. How to find common ground. How to move past fear and anger to respect, reflection, and renewal.

For ultimately, living beyond ourselves is how God calls us to live. God intends diversity and delights in it. God ordains a variety of communities, perspectives, and languages. God commissions us to share God’s blessings with one another. And in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, God longs still to create a new humanity who, in our scattering, still belongs to one another and to God, a beautiful, hard, perplexing, cantankerous, challenging mixing together that calls forth the best in us, for translation and interpretation skills we didn’t know we have or need. When life itself is on the line, the lowest common denominator is not good enough. We need to rise up, rise above, just a little lower than the angels, as God has made us, with crowns of honor and glory for every one.

Let us strive after true communication and communion with one another. Let us embrace the humility and reverence that come as we meet those different from ourselves. For the God who creates and scatters, who unites and divides, holds us all within one great loving arc of covenant and intends blessings upon us all.

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