

Up and Down
Acts 2:1-21 & Genesis 11:1-9
Pentecost, June 9, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Our two passages from Scripture –the Tower of Babel that we read first, and the Pentecost story from Acts--are at their cores, stories about who is in charge. I'll just give away the ending right now: it's not you. It's not me. We are not in charge.

Just like a couple of weeks ago, with the two stories that take place at gates, which I never would have noticed otherwise, if the lectionary hadn't put together the story of the Tower of Babel with the story of Pentecost, I'm not sure it would have crossed my mind to do so. But the contrast between them helps us understand each story a bit better. We can figure out what went wrong at the tower and what went right in that room in Jerusalem.

If you're like me, you probably haven't given much thought to the Tower of Babel. It's a story lots of us may have learned in Sunday School, but then we don't do much with it after that. This is a story of authority trying to go up, that is, humans trying to be in charge. The story tries to explain several things: the origin of the name Babel and the Babylonians, the origin of why there are so many languages and so many different groups of people when originally we were all together as one, and the presence of tall towers throughout the region, built to honor, and perhaps reach, other gods. All of those purposes are behind the story, behind the reason it is in Scripture.

But, as the story is told, especially when we set it beside the Pentecost story, Babel is a story of humans trying to be in charge. They build the tower, Genesis tells us, for their own glory, to make their names great. It's similar, in a way, to the story of the tree of good and evil a few chapters earlier, the tree from which Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat. In both cases, the humans take charge, do whatever they can to become like God themselves.

This urge to build up, to build a tower, not just for glory, but for fun, is part of human nature. Little kids learn to stack their blocks, and pretty soon they learn to stack their blocks even higher and higher and higher. Just last week we were at a graduation party at Andy's church. The hosts had set out some games so the younger children would be entertained. A giant connect 4 checkers game, some beach balls and balloons, and a giant Jenga game. If you haven't played Jenga, it's made up of rectangle blocks that begin the game all stacked up in a tidy tower,

three to a level, staggered in opposite directions. The game progresses with each player sliding one block from a lower layer and putting it on the top of the tower. The game ends when the tower crashes. Well, the kids had started a game and then abandoned it after the tower crashed for something a little more energetic. An adult approached the table where the blocks were, and remember this was a giant game, so each block was made from I'm guessing a two-by-two piece of lumber. He began constructing a tower, higher and higher. As he went, the room got quieter and quieter as people turned to watch him. I don't know him, but he must be an engineer, because each block was carefully placed and balanced. He used up all the blocks with a tower that was close to ten feet tall. It didn't crash for a long while, until a mischievous little preschooler "accidentally" bumped into it. Building towers is somehow part of human nature, just like wanting to be in charge must be.

Constructing a tower somehow shows our success, our triumph over gravity, our ability to keep up with other places and people who also build buildings. To make our names great, really. To show that we are in charge.

The humans at Babel initiate this city and tower, to try to insure that they will be great, that they are in charge, that God cannot stop their plans. I'm not sure about you, but I have made plans like this, plans to do my own thing regardless of what happens, to create x, y, or z no matter what God thinks, to stubbornly stick to my plans despite all signs to the contrary, to be in charge of my own life. We aren't so far off from those people at Babel.

The story makes pretty clear what God thinks of our attempts to do this. God sees what the humans are doing, sees not just the tower but sees into their hearts to determine their real motivation. God knows they are building up, not just literally but starting their project with human glory in mind, wanting to raise themselves up.

And so God scatters them, confuses them, confounds them at every turn. They can no longer work together because they can't understand each other, they can no longer speak or listen. Their plans to make their names great have fallen apart. Going up hasn't worked out for them.

This arrangement, with humans scattering hither and thither, understanding neither each other nor God, goes on for a while. The Biblical storyline, in the very next chapter, starts to narrow in on God's chosen people, and on Abraham in particular. But even with that focus, those other peoples and other languages are still out there, and God's chosen people interact with them,

sometimes in negative ways, throughout the narrative of the Old Testament. They never disappear.

And something has brought them together again on the day of Pentecost. It's the Jewish feasts of weeks, one of the festivals when Jews gather at Jerusalem, so the small band of people who are followers of Jesus are gathered together, and there's a crowd of other people there, too.

And astonishing things happen. Wind, fire, noise, confusion and happy chaos. And the languages, it's amazing. Everyone can understand things in their own languages, even though others don't speak them. The Spirit blows through the room and those who have been scattered for so long are gathered together, those who have been confused and misunderstood for so long are embraced.

It's the opposite of the Tower of Babel, really, in every respect. Like I said, if the lectionary hadn't put these two passages together, I'm not sure I would have seen it.

Instead of starting from the bottom up, the day of Pentecost starts from the top down. The people are not in charge. And it's clear to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear and skin to feel the rush of mighty wind.

The Spirit is in charge, and things are not orderly, there is not a building plan nor an agenda nor an outline in sight. Things are going haywire, no one seems to know what's happening, there is fire and wind and no structure whatsoever. It's enough to make us nervous, really.

The Tower of Babel starts with humans taking charge and claiming authority and working to make their own names great. It's a story of starting at the bottom and moving up, and the disastrous consequences.

The Day of Pentecost starts with the Spirit, who claims authority, creates what appears to be disorder but what in fact begins to gather the scattered peoples together. People from all over the known world (known from a Roman perspective that is), were there, and everyone was included and brought together in this amazing shared experience. Scripture makes sure that we understand that everyone present, not just the original disciples, not just the inner circle, but everyone from every background, received the tongues of fire and heard the preaching in their own language.

Those who had been scattered about were gathered together, united. But not for a purpose of their own design nor for their own glory. But united together for the purpose of sharing the good news they had received with the world.

The image that sticks in my mind is one I'll have to use quickly, because soon there will not be anyone left who knows what I'm talking about. I think that

all of you remember those reel-to-reel movie projectors, right? You'll remember that there were two reels that held the film, and it would go from the front reel of the machine, through the projector, and to the back reel.

We would watch movies on them in elementary school, and if we had been particularly good, so the teachers said, though now I'm thinking it was probably more like if there was too much time left in the class period. Anyway, if we had been particularly quiet and good while watching the movie, then the teacher would not rewind the movie up above the machine like normal—you would move the reels up and it could go faster, because it didn't have to get threaded through the machine. Instead, the teacher, for our reward, would reverse the filmstrip through the machine with the projector on, and we would get to see the whole thing backwards. If this happened, it made our day. It was just the most fun, best thing ever.

So anyway, picture that in your mind. The movie is the Building of the Tower of Babel. At the end of the movie, as the credits are rolling, the people are scattering farther and farther out from the now-destroyed tower. The movie stops, the projector light goes off, for a long, long time. And then on the Day of Pentecost, the movie goes in reverse. All the people start coming back toward one place, this time to a room in Jerusalem, this time to receive the Holy Spirit.

People, this time, we are not in charge. This time, the Spirit is in charge. Things are happening from the top down, swooping in and hovering over our heads. This time, instead of being united for our own glory, we're going to be united for God's glory.

This time, the people will be scattered again, sent out in the Spirit to share the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We will be sent out with a unified purpose, a common goal, encouraged by a common Spirit.