

Sermon Sept. 27 – The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

This story is probably more familiar to you than the one we read last week. But it still isn't one that gets much attention in worship.

This is the last of the most ancient of biblical stories – it's the last of what might be called the myths of origin. People sometimes see the story as an explanation of the origin of different languages.

But that isn't really what it's about.

More helpful is to see the story as God's judgment on human arrogance. It's the age old temptation of wanting to be like God.

But there's another way to understand the story that I want to focus on, because I think it is helpful for the situation we are in.

It has to do with the people's fear of being scattered. They build a tower and a city, likely with a fortress, so they won't be scattered.

Now, you might think... I thought God desired unity, not separation. After all, we've been saying that sin separates. Now it seems that God is the one doing the separating.

To understand what's going on, we have to go back to the very beginning. Way back...to the creation story itself in the first chapter of Genesis. God made humankind in God's image. Then God tells them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and be caretakers of all creation.

After the flood, God says the same thing to Noah and his family, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

See God's vision is that humankind would spread throughout the earth, co-creating and tending creation – human beings are to be God's partners throughout the earth.

But here, they don't want to do that. They don't want to spread throughout the earth. They don't want to be scattered. They are afraid of being scattered.

They want to build a city and a tower so that can stay right where they are. They want things to stay the same. They don't want the kind of upheaval that scattering throughout the earth would bring.

They don't want to go other places. They like the sameness – they are one people, with one language. They are a close-knit tribe, and they want it to stay that way.

But, in doing so, they are neglecting their call to the rest of creation.

For God, what the people are doing puts all of creation at risk. God depends on them to scatter, so that all creation will grow and flourish.

God does desire unity. But unity is not the same thing as sameness. The unity God desires is unity in God, and unity of purpose.

Humankind is to be united in God's purpose to populate the earth and to care for each other and the rest of creation. Building towers and fortresses keeps them from accomplishing that purpose.

Instead of getting out in the world to do God's work, they want to stay in this safe place they've created. They want to hang out with God, but not have to do the uncomfortable and even dangerous work God wants them to do.

So here's what I'm kind of wondering. I wonder if all the upheaval of this year is the modern day church's tower of babel moment.

The Christian church's call is similar to the Old Testament call. Well, it doesn't say so much about be fruitful and multiply, but we are called to spread the good news of Christ's love throughout the earth. We're called to multiply disciples. And we are still called to care for others and for all of creation.

The church's record on all that is a little mixed.

Now, understand I'm talking about the Church – capital C – and not specifically our congregations.

I think we've always had folks in our congregations willing to find ways to be the church outside the building.

The church in general, and probably all congregations at times, have too often gotten caught up in buildings...to many Christians the church is the building where God is housed. And many would rather that's where God stayed.

The feeling of God's presence in the sanctuary can make us feel like the church is the calm in the storm...the place we can go to get away from the world and its problems.

But the Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, and enlightens the church...and then takes the church, its people, out into the world. And the Holy Spirit can be a little wild.

When the Holy Spirit scatters us into the world, we are forced to recognize that God isn't as controllable as we'd like. When God is on the loose it causes all sorts of problems.

A God on the loose in the world might have us loving people we don't want to.

A God on the loose in the world might drag us to places we really don't want to go.

A God on the loose might inspire us to take stands that scare us.

A God on the loose is going to have us questioning assumptions about how the world should look.

When we can't lock God up in a tower, there's no telling what will happen.

And not all the towers and fortresses we build are actual buildings. We've built towers of nationalism – so that God and nation are almost joined.

We've built towers of political parties – where we're sure that God belongs to our political party.

We've built towers of race and ethnicity and sexual and gender categories such that we're convinced those who are different from us live outside our tower...and away from God.

Now, during the pandemic, we're not able to be in our towers. And even many congregations that have returned to their buildings are finding that so much has changed it doesn't feel like that same safe tower anymore.

It turns out that God doesn't just hang out in our towers. Via our laptops and ipads and phones and the US mail, God is hanging out in our living rooms and patios and coffee shops and even cars.

And if God is in all those places, well God could be anywhere!

The disconcerting thing is that God wants to drag us to all those places...God wants to scatter the church instead of letting us be comfortable in our towers and fortresses.

The irony is that right now of course, scattering out in to the world physically in the midst of a pandemic has to be done with care, if at all. Caring for creation can sometimes look like staying home and wearing a mask.

No matter the situation, our call is still to spread the gospel, make disciples, and care for other people and for the whole creation! And what better time to rethink how we do that than in a time that's already so abnormal.

I've said this before and it bears repeating – I don't believe God caused the pandemic to teach us a lesson or get us to do something.

But God does seem pretty willing to use the pandemic to challenge our way of thinking and our desire for a safe tower. The pandemic has shown the cracks in our social and economic safety nets. It's shown us some of the places where the hardest work needs to be done.

Events over the last six months have forced us out of that safe world where racism no longer exists and now the Spirit is dragging people into the work for racial justice.

The growing interest in anti-racist work among broad parts of our population is nothing short of remarkable. I think that reflects the Holy Spirit moving us out of our safe towers.

In fires and floods and droughts, creation is crying out, forcing us to see that we can't afford to wall ourselves off in our partisan towers, each side believing they have the only solutions to climate change and forest fires.

This is a very uncomfortable and disheartening time. It's easy to think it's all hopeless. And if we just focus on partisan politics as our solution, honestly it might be.

But partisan politics are not ultimate. If you look beyond that, there are signs that God is scattering people out into the world to do the work of caring and tending for each other and all of creation.

We just thought that would look safer and more peaceful than it does. Honestly, to see God at work you probably have to look at the places where there is the most upheaval and discomfort.

So where have you seen God at work in ways you didn't expect?

What uncomfortable nudges is God giving you? How is God trying to get you to scatter? What new languages are you having to learn to navigate the world as it is now?

Our towers might seem safer, but they are not where God calls us to be. God calls us to scatter and bring love and care to the world outside the tower – even, or maybe especially, when it doesn't seem safe.