

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church  
**"Tower of Babel at Pentecost"**

By Eric Howell  
Genesis 11:1-9  
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A husband comes home from work, throws on his grubby clothes and goes out at dusk to mow the yard. He's already tired and would rather just sit and rest for a bit, but the yard needs to be mowed and this is one way he serves his family and household. After mowing he comes in and hunches over the computer balancing the checkbook and paying bills. In all of this, what he's saying is "I love you." His wife meanwhile is trying to cook dinner, deal with the kids and the messy house. She's tired too; worn out. When she sees him on the lawn mower, she isn't hearing, "I love you." What she hears is the dull hum of the lawnmower under the piercing screams of the kids. When he's writing bills, she isn't hearing "I love you." She's feeling like she's being avoided when all she wants is some adult conversation. Living in the same house, but they still don't know how to speak one another's language.

Her birthday rolls around and he presents her with her present -- a blender. He's saying, "I love you." She hears, "Fix me some food, woman." She cries. He's confused. So the next birthday, she gets a diamond necklace. She cries again. He's more confused. He's trying to say, "I love you." What she needs to hear is simply "I love you. Let's spend the afternoon together." They don't know how to speak one another's language. Saying what you want to say in the way you want to say it, and having it heard the way you intended it is a deep challenge for humanity, even if you speak the same language; even if you live in the same house.

We live in a time when there are more opportunities and tools for communication than ever in the history of the world; but we still can't communicate well. Though we can speak and engage one another in ways beyond the wildest imaginations of our grandparents and their grandparents, we probably really communicate less than ever before. Noise does not equal speech. Being in the same room talking does not mean discussing. It doesn't mean we really are able to understand one another.

In the biblical tradition, this is the legacy of the Tower of Babel, a sky-scraping city and tower built on the foundation of human arrogance and a misguided common goal. The tower is long gone, but the Babble remains.

In the biblical story, all the people had one language and shared the same words. With this commonality, they settled in a vast plain and decided to build a city with a tower that would top out in the heavens. It wasn't because they needed the office space. It wasn't to draw the eyes of the people to the heavens and that which is greater than us. It wasn't to glorify God. All this trouble was to "make a name for ourselves." Seems kind of silly doesn't it? Maybe they were looking for

something to unify them. They had a lot in common; but nothing that bound them to one another -- nothing that met the deep human craving for relationship and interdependence -- like covenant or love. So the best idea they could come up with was to build a big city with a tall tower. There is an eerily similar theory that I was once told about. How to continue to grow and motivate your church: constantly have a building campaign even if you don't really need it, because people are unified by a common project. So I'm here to announce to you today the next building project for DaySpring -- just kidding; though if you keep filling this place up, we'll actually need another building campaign very soon.

Back to Babel. They would start in a plain (a low place) and make their own bricks rather than using any stones. Every bit of it would be their own work. No one and nothing else could take credit for it, or judge it, or critique it, or question it. The only thing bigger than them would be something they made themselves. It was never suggested particularly that they would worship the tower itself, but we know humanity well enough to know what happens.

Just because people all work on a project together, whatever kind of building project it is -- a tower or a church, doesn't mean they are a community in the way that Christians think about community. One preacher put it like this, "Ducks on a pond attacking a little ugly duckling is not a community, no more than children on a playground picking on the new kid, or a nation protecting only its own economic interests, or a church looking out only for itself."\* For us, community means more than just simply agreeing and being able to speak with one another for our own purposes; it means agreeing with and being able to speak with God. The Christian story gives shape to community more than just agreeing together. It's agreeing with one another and with God.

But they build their tower. We know what that's like, I think. Short of being disciplined by the relationships that would direct their energies to worship or mutual service, or love, humans have a tendency to stack up anything we can find to build a monument to ourselves. These towers are not always made of brick. They are often called resumes, portfolios, CV's, or garages. We build our own little towers out of our careers, our learning, our accomplishments, our money, our churches. While in one sense the Tower of Babel story is very strange, in another sense, it is very familiar. Like the hymn says, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." In one of the humorous and humbling verses in the Bible, Genesis 11:5, God comes down to check out this tower that was supposed to reach up to the heavens. It's hard to miss the smirk on the face of the storyteller at that little tidbit.

God comes down and sees what the human heart has produced and can't be surprised. God has already seen the human heart and human will in action:

At the trunk of the forbidden tree, humans will get together and eat the fruit.

At the altar of our pride, humans will snuff the lives of our brothers and sisters.

Left to our own, humans will build monuments to our own legacies instead of growing lives given to God's mercy and will.

"If the people will go this far, they'll just keep on going. There's no filter with these people when they get an idea in their heads. There's no stopping them. I said I wouldn't destroy them again in a flood. But they will destroy themselves."

God scatters the people. God babbles their speech. From then on not just their nationalities and languages, but also their customs and cultures, and not just that, but their goals and dreams, their plans and purposes, their loves and communications would be as confused on the outside as they already were misguided on the inside.

They would be as confused as parents and teenagers talking about curfew and sex;  
as Republicans and democrats talking about health care;  
as husbands and wives talking about finances.\*

We are most aware that we speak a foreign language when we order a sandwich in France or seek a bathroom in Kenya. But we speak a foreign language in our own homes too. Husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors may speak the same English, but use different words, and even more so mean different things by those different words and different actions. We are a babbled people.

That chaos and babble is not just between us -- republicans and democrats, husbands and wives, parents and children -- but is often within each of us even more so. The voices in our heads can roar in confused punctuated dialogue and running commentary on our own lives. We host internal debates about right and wrong, this way and that way, whether to leave a job or stay in it, whether to leave a marriage or stick it out. We don't know how to speak to ourselves, to one another -- and truth be told -- we don't know how to speak with God about much of this within us.

The story leaves off in Genesis 11 with this sense of confusion and chaos. A people who wanted to build a tower so they would have a name and not be scattered, are now scattered, with their tower in ruins and no name that is remembered.

The movement in scripture toward redemption begins in chapter 12. Out of the scattered nations and languages, God calls one man, "Abram, go from your country and your father's house to the land that I will show you." With Abraham, one man out of so many, God begins the redemption of Babel, and Noah's flood, and Adam's fruit, and the fallenness of you and me. It's a redemption that finds its fulfillment in one other man, the Son of man and Son of God, who was Himself lifted up on a cross by humanity's designs, but was lifted even higher by the power of God.

Someone suggested to me recently a way to understand our piece of iron art in the narthex that I had not considered before. Supposedly there are 21 Christian symbols in the art on the wall. Honestly, I can find a few, but not 21 in all the movement and chaos of the art. The art represents the chaos of our lives that we bring when we come in here. It's a mirror. And maybe in only finding a few of the symbols when I look at it, is a mirror that I am an incomplete Christian, in whom only parts of my life are redeemed and ordered. Maybe we all see something different when we look on it. It represents the chaos and confusion and babble of the world. And then, passing by the truthful reminder of where we come from, we come in here, in this place of sanctuary on a Sunday for worship and the symbols are ordered as an invitation to have our lives ordered by something truly greater than we are. It's a movement from chaos to order, from babble to divine speech.

The possibility of movement from chaos to divine speech is promised at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit makes it possible for people from different nations to understand one another. On this day, Babel is undone -- overturned. Babel was about humans trying to build to the gods. Pentecost is about God coming to humans. Babel is about accomplishing. Pentecost is about receiving a gift. Babel is about us. Pentecost is about what God does in us. Pentecost is the promise that the legacy of Babel can be undone.

At the feast of Pentecost, Acts 2 tells us, "all these people were gathered from all these different places." The Bible goes to quite a length to describe where all the people are from. When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Tongues of fire rested on them. And then this happened: they began to speak in a way that all these people who didn't know each other's language, could understand each other. It was more than that they had a sudden ability to master a foreign language. It was the Spirit mysteriously making it possible for people to speak with one another.

It's not an accident or coincidence that this experience, followed by a sermon from Peter, and the conversion of thousands, is considered the birthday of the church. Church is given to us as the people that can be the kind of community -- THE community in which we can learn to speak to one another and listen and share a language that does not erase the differences between us, but transcends them.

The Tongues of Fire of Pentecost notwithstanding, this is hard work. Tongues of fire don't commonly rest on us. But the miracle still happens. By God's grace we still have a place to be who we really are, and accepted for it, to speak with the tongues of men and angels and have love. We have a place to learn to speak with our lives, the divine language that binds us as a people. It's still hard work, but the miracle is that it is even possible.

No wonder Jesus kept telling His disciples, "I am sending a Helper to be with you." No wonder the Bible says the Spirit helps us when we don't know how to pray -- takes our prayers to God with groanings too deep for words. Yes our groanings

are too deep for words because words, at least the words we have, don't come close to expressing the cravings of our hearts for community, for wholeness, for salvation beyond anything we can build with our hands or merely our efforts.

As church, we yearn to be people who anticipate the worship, in which with the whole world before our Maker, Redeemer, and Sustainer, we sing the three words that transcend and unite all of us in humble adoration – “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

*\* For these images and examples, I am in debt to a sermon by James Lowry, “It was a warm day in”*