

Covenant Presbyterian Church

“Strength in Numbers”

Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

Jeffrey Fox-Kline, June 9, 2019

The two scripture readings for today are the kind of large scale spectacles that stand out even amidst all of the other spectacles found in the Bible. The story we just heard, that of Pentecost, is a foundational story in our church, known as the birthday of the church. The tongues of fire, the speaking in tongues, the reaction of the crowd – these are all things that stand out and grab our attention when we read them. The first story that we heard, the Tower of Babel, is similarly a spectacular story, though on an even grander scale. The Tower of Babel comes between Noah and the flood, and the story of Abraham. It acts as a sort of a buffer between those giant stories of humanity and the more intimate stories of God’s people. And the Tower of Babel serves as an excellent caper to that first section of Genesis. It’s a wide-screen, panoramic, dizzying story about a tower that finds its top in the heavens.

One thing you may not know about me is that I have long been an avid comic book reader. Especially in high school and college, but it has certainly persisted into my adulthood. One thing I have enjoyed doing over the past few years is collecting comic book adaptations of the Bible. Usually, these comics focus on the Old Testament – something about the propulsive action and drama lends itself to an illustrated medium much more than images of Jesus standing around talking. The Tower of Babel in particular has received treatment from some fantastic and legendary comic artists.

Here’s Basil Wolverton’s vision of Babel. Wolverton was described by the New York Times as “the Michaelangelo of Mad Magazine”. Known for his ability to

depict the grotesque, Wolverton converted to Christianity later in life and drew illustrations for a number of Old Testament texts

Joe Kubert is a legend in the field, illustrator of some of DC comics' early Hawkman issues as well as a long and influential run on Tarzan. In the 1970s he was asked to provide illustrations for DC Comics' adaptation of the Bible.

More recently, the artist Vincent Locke provided the story of the Tower of Babel in an anthology book called "Testament". Locke is known for drawing zombies, but contributed his paintbrush for the book with this expansive painting of Babel.

Finally, Brendon Powell Smith decided to ambitiously illustrate the entire Bible using only Legos, in "the Brick Bible". Here's his vision of the Tower of Babel.

These artists have tried to capture the sense and grandeur of a tower that has its "top in the heavens". Their illustrations and interpretations are fairly straightforward interpretations of what the text says and the story it tells. The classic interpretation goes something like this: humanity is all in one place. Humanity wants to make a monument to its greatness. God doesn't like the competition. God punishes them by making them all speak different languages.

This interpretation of languages as a punishment is evident in all of the comic pages that I just displayed.

Look at the anger and anguish in the faces of Basil Wolverton's Babel.

Joe Kubert has the people saying "I won't work with idiots, let's get away from here!"

Vince Locke has a fistfight breaking out in his panel depicting the confusing of languages.

The scattering in the Brick Bible has pure panic written on the faces of the lego people.

But that's one interpretation of the story. The panic, the punishment, the disarray of the confusion. Recently, a newer interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel has found favor. Old Testament scholar Ted Hiebert teamed up with Christian Educator extraordinaire Lib Caldwell and illustrator Katie Yamasaki to bring this new interpretation to life in beautiful detail in their book "God's Big Plan"

The book can be found in the church's library if you're interested in checking it out in person!

This book looks at the Tower of Babel story and wonders, what if God wanted us to be different. That would certainly fit in with God's command to humankind to "be fruitful and multiply". So now we come to the story of Pentecost. Some commentators have described Pentecost as the reversal of the Tower of Babel. And this makes some sense – in Babel the languages were confused. On Pentecost the people could each hear in their own language. In Babel the people were scattered, on Pentecost the people gathered together and formed the Christian community. But to see Pentecost as a reversal of the Babel story is to miss a critical detail: on Pentecost the disciples started speaking in tongues. It isn't that the crowd started being able to miraculously understand Aramaic, but rather that the speakers were changed. On Pentecost, the good news of God's salvation did not call all people to uniformity and unanimity, but rather towards unity in the midst of their diversity. This diversity was celebrated and affirmed in the fledgling community. If we're to take seriously what God calls us to be, then we need to take seriously the call for diversity in our community.

In the Tower of Babel story we see two extremes – extreme unity, and scatteredness. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says "it is conventional to read this text as a simple either/or proposition: the disobedient unity of the peoples based in pride, or the scattering done by God as punishment". But what I

feel is important to keep in mind is that the story did not end at the Tower of Babel. The people scattered, and multiplied, and multiplied over the face of the known world. From that scatteredness came violence, conflict, territorial disputes, us/them mentalities, tribalism, racism and separation. Also from that scatteredness came art, music, food, creativity, generations of unique beauty, community, and hope. The Tower of Babel provided an opportunity to explore the best aspects of human nature, as well as the worst. At our worst, we are greedy and afraid, and in our separation, we can see the fear and the greed cause us to hate those who speak different languages from us, who come from different cultures, who share different identities. At our best, we are curious and hopeful, and in our separation, we can see the ability for us to use different approaches and ideas to make the world a better place, we have the ability to honor the image of God and to celebrate that image through exploring each other's realities. We can also see the harm found in homogenous unity – a lack of interest in other things, a focus on self, a prideful inflation of the self that doesn't acknowledge others' needs. But a diverse unity helps look outward and towards justice, desires to expand its unity, a diverse unity sparks hope for mutual understanding that brings the world closer to God's kingdom.

Pentecost shows us the fulfillment of the best aspects of the blessing of scattering found in the Tower of Babel. People coming together, speaking in unity and with a common purpose, but with each individual's identity respected and affirmed. The kingdom of God looks like a unity found in a common purpose supported by a diverse group of people.

How have we managed in our lives to celebrate diversity? How in our lives do we reach out to people who are different than us? Unity is important, yes, but unity that comes from homogeneity reinforces those worst aspects of humanity. What forces do we see in our lives enforcing homogeneity? It is true that the powerful

people in the world find benefits in keeping us divided, in supporting a negative separation, and promoting a toxic unity. Creating division amongst people of different backgrounds and encouraging an ugly false unity is a very quick way to find yourself in power. Division based on culture and difference is absolutely propagated by systems. However, we would be lying if we said that it is solely the result of oppressive systems that prevents us finding unity in diversity. Many of us prefer the safety of a false unity over the challenge of a diverse unity. It is hard to be challenged by our neighbor to think differently, to act differently, to consider other ideas. Our unwillingness to listen to the voices of our neighbors contributes to a negative separation. Our pride at feeling that we know better than our neighbor contributes to a negative separation. Our lack of initiative to seek out people who think, look and act differently from us contributes to this.

But we take heart and inspiration from the church at Pentecost. In that place, the Spirit of God exploded into the world and ignited the followers of Jesus to reach out to those who are from different places, have different languages, share different cultures and bring different gifts. In the story of the Tower of Babel we see God's initiative in creating diversity. In Pentecost, we see God's call to all Christians to welcome diversity, to wrestle with its challenges and to embrace its gifts. Because God's will for us is to be sent into the world, to grow in diversity and to work together in unity for the kingdom of God.