



FROM THE BEGINNING: CALLED TO DISPERSE

October 7, 2018, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; World Communion Sunday
Genesis 11:1-9

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

I love the droll humor, the sharp tongue, in the poetry of Billy Collins, a professor of English and Poet Laureate of the United States as well as of the State of New York.

His poem, “Introduction to Poetry,” could also be called ‘Introduction to Homiletics, the art of preaching:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope



and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. ⁱ

I have avoided preaching today's text for the entire 34 years of my ordained life. Recently, a former student asked me to preach from her ordination and chose this text as the beginning for her ministry. I have avoided Genesis 11:1-9 because it has one meaning...and a dreary one at that. Perhaps you have always heard it interpreted the way I have. This story is the closing act of a sorry beginning for the human race. The first 11 chapters of Genesis detail what a hopeless, sinful lot we are. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are cast out of Eden, consigned to toil and death; Cain kills Abel and asks with a sneer, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?"

Then sin runs so rampant that God turns on humanity in a flood of anger, saving the only good person God can find—Noah, along with his family—the last, best hope for a divine do-over. But the ground is barely dry when a scandal involving Noah's sons is uncovered, so to speak, and another curse pronounced.

Finally, with our text, sin reaches its fullest height, literally. The tower of Babel is built with human pride as much as it is built with those burned bricks. Arrogantly, people build, brick upon brick, until its top breaches heaven. A towering monument to themselves and an attack upon God's sovereignty. That's when God intervenes, confusing their languages so they cannot communicate, which means they cannot continue their work. In a final act of punishment, God scatters them across the face of the whole earth. The aptly named Babel, its city and tower, are abandoned; left eternally unfinished. And it has been thus ever since, hasn't it? Every human endeavor, everything we so proudly, willfully 'build,' all attempts to "make a name for ourselves" in perpetuity...all of it is ultimately left undone, remains unfinished. Our prideful lives, our sinful plans, even our best intentions are scattered by the greater power of God.



But perhaps we have tied this text to a chair with rope and tortured a confession from it...beat it with a hose to find out what it really means. You see, biblical texts, like poetry, resist static meaning. The Bible is a living Word that can surprise us if we hold it up to a light or press our ear against its hive; walk inside its room or waterski across its surface. It turns out there are other ways to read this story.

This text opens with an astonishing declaration: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” Can you imagine that? The whole earth...one language and the same words. And the people with this one language and the same words migrate from the east. They move, it seems, as one solid unit with a common understanding and shared purpose that is sorely lacking in our own time. They come upon a plain in the land of Shinar and decide to settle there. To settle down right there together. Everyone seems of one mind about it. By verse 4, this settled people of the one language and the same words have decided in common what they will do:

Verses 3 and 4 spell out the plan they have agreed upon. They say in unison the same words 3 times in two verses: “Come, let us...Come let us...Let us...” “Come let us make bricks...” “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower...” “Let us make a name for ourselves...” And though that can sound a little prideful, I suppose, the text does not imply boasting, but something else altogether. The text and the people of that one language and the same words finish the sentence and their collective activity with these words: “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” They do not sound boastful. They sound afraid.

What if it is fear, not pride, at the core of this story? Then it is a story about people who want to preserve their homogeneity; to protect and preserve their sameness. They settle down together and intend to stick together. They understand each other, after all; they have a shared vocabulary, speak the same words, mean the same things. And there is comfort in that. It makes it easier to build a city together, with walls and a watchtower. Threats from outside can be warded off. Everyone “in” can be kept in...and safe.



Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor skillfully shows that the literary form of this story uses 'the same words' over and over again. In addition to "Come let us..." spoken by the humans three times and once by God, "All the earth" is a phrase that occurs in verses 1, 4, 8, and 9. Tongue, scattered, build, baffled...and other phrases as well are repeated within and across verses. The story itself becomes its own "echo chamber," is its own "language world."ⁱⁱ

I emailed my colleague at Columbia Seminary, Brennan Breed, a brilliant scholar about this text. Brennan emailed: "...the "baby-like language of Babel (the repetition of just a few words) is important. Everyone uses "just a few same words"...They don't want to be scattered, because it would weaken their power...but also because they don't want heterogeneity...to be dispersed into an unmanageable and scary diversity of languages and cultures. I usually like to point out, Brennan wrote, "that some people want to return to a Babel-like past where everyone was the same..."ⁱⁱⁱ It is how we act when we are afraid.

Think of the ways in which we are seeing our own language reduced these days to "the same words" used over and over again. In a response of fear to immigrants, refugees and the increasing diversity of our country, we've come up with terms such as 'alien' and 'illegal immigrants,' shortened that to 'illegals,' as though any human bearing God's image is 'illegal.' Presidents and Prime Ministers alike have been quoted in newspapers warning against a "swarm of immigrants" who threaten to "infest" the country, as though desperate people were no more than insects or cockroaches.^{iv} To call others 'animals' or 'deplorables,' to term cages housing children snatched from their mothers and fathers as "tender age shelters," is to use "the same words," to wall in the city and set up a watchtower.

When will we ever learn from our history, biblical and national? How we called Native Americans savages as we yet savaged them? Spoke of African Americans as "property" centuries ago yet still employ dehumanizing racial speech today? How we withheld the right to vote from women, defining them the 'lesser, dependent sex,' yet even now respond to the raised voices of women by telling

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



them to “grow up...” as if we are still lesser, dependent, immature girls. When will we ever learn, when in 2017 members of the Jewish synagogue in Charlottesville were trapped inside their sanctuary as Nazi phrases were chanted aloud on America’s streets?

No wonder, then, no wonder...that by verse 5 God takes a close look and decides it is enough. That left to ourselves, there is no end to what we will do out of fear, because of difference. So the Lord confuses their languages to stop the wall. And the unoccupied city is named Babel. And the people are dispersed abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And I suppose we can look at that as punishment.

But what if God means it for a blessing?

What if from the very beginning God intended us to be dispersed? In Genesis, after everything was created, and human beings last of all, Genesis 1:28, says that God blessed them and said: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God repeated this blessing, this command to Noah and his sons after the flood in Genesis 9:1: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God did not say: Settle down in one place, speak the same few words, and wall yourselves in.”

No, from the beginning, we were made to follow an unsettled God; called to disperse across the earth...deepening in diversity...speaking many languages, each with its own patterns and richness and tones...overflowing with words that stretch us to describe the beauty and emotions and hopes and awe of this world God has made...these lives God has given us.

“Babel,” as Brennan said to me, was “hampering God’s plan.” We have been scattered with many languages and many words not as punishment, but in divine blessing. God has created by design a colorful, confusing, messy world for God’s own purposes, as a blessing, to live in fully, that we might be a blessing for others. One thing is certain—we cannot perceive it as a blessing if we receive it in fear.



A recent issue of *The New Yorker* included an article about hyperpolyglots, a designation reserved for people who have command of a minimum of eleven languages. The author tells of a man who has command of 22 living languages and 6 classical or endangered languages as well. The author interviewed Michael Erard, who conducted an online survey of 400 masters of languages. He published his research under the title, “Babel No More.” But it was not until he had finished his book, Erard said, that he noticed a common thread among the many stories of the polyglots he studied. He noted that his subjects “had embraced their otherness, and they had cultivated it.” Yet, he said, if speech defines us as human, a related faculty had eluded many of the polyglots he interviewed: the ability to connect. Each new language was a potential conduit—an escape route from solitude. But only if they embraced it as such. Often the people he studied had not. “I hadn’t realized that was my story, too,” Erard said.^v

God did not create us to live in fear or sequestered in solitude. From the beginning we were called to disperse, become a diverse people, with an expanded vocabulary, enriching one another through our differences and distinctiveness, yet also connecting, engaging in a deeper communion. The first Sunday of October is always designated as World Communion Sunday. This tradition is a gift from our denomination to the world. It was first celebrated in 1933 by the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, the idea of their pastor. Think of what was happening in the world in 1933. This service is designed to celebrate the amazing diversity, the wide and varied expression of the Body of Christ in the world...while also calling us to unity though not uniformity. This day, like this text, is grounded in the God who calls us out of fear into joy, out of solitude toward communion. God means it as a blessing that we might be a blessing in and for the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry” in **The Apple That Astonished Paris** (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 58.



ⁱⁱ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Let All the Peoples Praise You: Biblical Studies and a Hermeneutics of Hunger" in *The Catholic Quarterly* 72, 2010, 4. Also see her new Commentary on Genesis 1-25, published in 2018 by Smyth & Helwys,

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal correspondence with Professor Brennan Breed.

^{iv} Several newspaper articles examine this language. See Esther Yu His Lee's August 13, 2015 article, "The Dehumanizing History of the Words We've Used to Describe Immigrants," at ThinkProgress.org. Also, Sarah Jones' June 20, 2018 article, "Why Tyrants Dehumanize the Powerless," at newrepublic.com.

^v Judith Thurman, "Maltese for Beginners" in *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2018, 48-55.