

## ***“This is Only the Beginning”***

Adventures in the Bible Summer Series

Week 1 of 3: Adventures in the Sky!

*Genesis 11:1-9*

New Revised Standard Version

The Bible is full of stories about how we humans seek to be faithful but somehow, somehow fall short, and yet God’s faithfulness returns to us in greater measure than our failings. Rinse and repeat. That’s the cycle of Scripture because it’s the cycle of our lives. On our more hopeful days, we can see this cycle as a labyrinth-like path that leads us deeper into the meaning of life and the discovery of faith. On our despairing days, this cycle feels like a pointless hamster wheel at best or a spiraling, destructive cyclone at worst. If history keeps repeating itself, then why work hard and hope for change? What’s the point?

Well, while we live in a cycle of repeating patterns that remind us some things about us never change, Scripture seeks to remind us that change is yet possible and while we humans keep ourselves trapped by our own limitations, God still yet

dreams for us a vision that we have yet to attain. And we cannot lose that vision. That vision of the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. It’s the reason Jesus came to earth and it is the reason we disciples carry on his message. It is a vision of abundance and plenty for all, of stewardship - giving and receiving so that all people have enough and no one has too much or too little. It is a vision of forgiveness and figuring things out - together. A vision of living life with the ethic of love, with the willingness to sacrifice what one has without resentment or comparison. It is a vision of thinking not of what we’ve earned or deserve but rather of what God has given us and what we can share with others. It is a vision of communication, compassion, creativity, and community. And of course, it is a vision of true communion with God - the life and source of our Being.

You know, there are 66 books in the Bible divided into 1,189

chapters. And in the 1<sup>st</sup> book of the Bible, in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter - in the first 1% of our recorded scripture - we have this story that I think speaks to 99% of the reason of why we stay stuck in this cycle of failing to live up to God's vision for us and why we struggle so hard to love our neighbor and to live in unity of purpose. The reason? A frustration with communication. That leads to a feeling of futility. That leads to a failure to connect and engage with one another.

Many scholars say that Genesis 11 is an etiological story - an origin story - that explain how so many different cultures and languages came to be. However, I think it's more than just a pre-scientific explanation for why we speak different languages, I think it's an origin story about the temptation to shut down, stop talking, and retreat to one's own camp when the conversation gets tough. The people end up physically scattered all over the earth, but even more, they end up scattered in their perspectives and communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Koenig, "Commentary on Genesis 11:1-9," *Working Preacher* (9 June 2019), accessed on Aug. 21, 2020 at

Now there have been at least three main emphases in traditional interpretations of this text. The first is that this is a story about pride and rebellion against God. The people attempt to build a tower because they desire to make a name for themselves (vs 4), when God is the one who ultimately makes a name for people,"<sup>1</sup> which will be evident in the promise to Abram one chapter later in Genesis 12:2: *"I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing."*

Second, this story is a critique of the dominating power of empire, particularly the Babylonian empire that destroyed Judah and took the people away into exile.<sup>2</sup> The name of the city, "Babel" (vs 9), is the same Hebrew word we see in "Babylon." And after all, "among other things, empires impose a single dominant language -- as Alexander the Great did in the Macedonian empire -- and thereby enforce a level of unity

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4078](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4078).

<sup>2</sup> Koenig, *ibid*.

and conformity.”<sup>3</sup> So maybe this text is God speaking out against the false unity of empire and all the power plays that come with it.

A third way of understanding this text has been to see the people’s desire to remain in one place as contrary to God’s mandate that they “*spread out and fill the whole earth*” as stated in Genesis 1:27-28:

*“God created humankind in his image and said ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth,’ and in Genesis 9:1: “God blessed Noah and his sons and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”*

Now, the people were actually ‘filling the earth,’ they were journeying when the text begins in verse 2, but they eventually find a place to *yasab* (in Hebrew to “dwell or to sit”). So while they were supposed to be traveling the earth, the people stop moving, literally. And metaphorically then, they stop learning and growing and pushing themselves to overcome challenges and obstacles.

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<sup>3</sup> Koenig, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> David Guzik, “Genesis 11 - Mankind after the Flood; the Tower of Babel,” *Enduring Word* (2018), accessed

Their first action as “dwellers” is to make bricks. They use “bitumen” as mortar (vs 3), the same material used by Noah in waterproofing the ark (Gen. 6:14) and as we’ll read in Exodus 2:3 the same material that Moses’ mother uses to waterproof Moses’ basket. This is significant because it reveals that perhaps the people were building this tower NOT to disobey God’s desire for them to fill the earth and multiply but because they were fearful and afraid and maybe didn’t believe God’s promise that never again would the earth be flooded.<sup>4</sup>

If you’ve ever been in an area that’s been rebuilt after major flooding, what do you see? Houses on platforms and stilts, so that they will not be flooded when the waters rise. These folks are building a city, a new place to live, and in the center of the city they want to have a bitumen/brick tower - that is, a sturdy, WATERPROOF tower - that reaches to the sky to protect themselves if the flood waters come again. In this sense, perhaps making a name

on Aug. 21, 2020 at <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/genesis-11/>.

for themselves is not about pride and wanting to be like God, but rather about literally having their name survive if such destruction should come upon them again.

Honestly, it's not that unreasonable of a plan. Some would actually call it wise. It definitely gives me pause in the traditional understanding that assumes that just because the people are building a high tower then that means they think that are like God. Maybe they're building a high tower because they don't trust that God will protect them if the waters come again. These are two different motivations. The first is pride, hubris, and arrogance, the second is a fear of dying and a doubting of God's promises and faithfulness.

Regardless, it's in verse 5 where things get interesting to me. God "comes down" to see the city and tower and says, *"Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do;*

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<sup>5</sup> If you are wondering why God talks in the first person plural ("we"), it refers to the royal "we" language that you see used for God on and off throughout the Torah depending on the author. It suggests a "divine council"

*nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come let us<sup>5</sup> go down and confuse their language so they will not understand one another's speech."* And then of course the people scatter and we're left with a half-built tower in the middle of a half-built city called Babel.

Now for ages, we've interpreted verses 5-8 to mean that God was upset and therefore the multiple languages and scattering was punishment. God was mad at the people because God saw their pride and that they wanted to be like God. This is the age old story; think of Adam and Eve and the Serpent and the temptation to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But when we stop short with these kinds of interpretations what we are really doing is selling ourselves short. We're basically saying, we are bad and do bad things and God comes down and punishes us when we are bad.

of sorts within God's self. I won't go into that more right now, but if you want to know more I encourage you to research it.

Not only does that not help me grow in my faith, I also just don't see God acting as a punishing God in this text, nor do I see the people being that arrogant. I think they are honestly trying to be smart and survive and make a new home for themselves with a tower reaching to the skies so that they can survive a flood. Their ancestors had told them that Noah and the Ark story one too many times. Or maybe they were supposed to keep moving instead of settling down but they were just stubborn and didn't want to hear or heed God's call at first. They wouldn't be the only ones. Remember Jonah?

Further to the point, if God was angry with the people for building this city or tower, then it seems like God would have just destroyed the city and tower, but God didn't destroy anything they built. Instead what we read is a God who marvels at the resourcefulness and potential of God's people. God says, *"This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them."* It reminds me of when the angel Gabriel says to young Mary

when he's informing her that God has chosen her to bear the son of God, *"For nothing will be impossible with God,"* (Luke 1:37).

God's possibilities and miracles and wonders have always involved people. Jesus is a prime example. God used a human to show us the miracle of radical grace and forgiveness and to embody the power of resurrection. God uses people to make impossible things possible. God created that ability within us, God sees that potential within us, and God empowers us to act on this gift within ourselves. What we think is impossible, God makes possible, but not through some magic Abracadabra wand-waving. No, God makes the impossible possible through us - through humanity! Through you and through me.

Genesis 11:6 is one of the most hopeful verses in scripture. God sees the capacity of humans and says, *"This is only the beginning of what they can do; nothing will be impossible for them."* This is only the beginning!

What if instead of reading the confusion of language and the scattering of the people as punishment, what if we read it as a test or as an opportunity for learning and growth? The same way Jesus was tempted and tried in the desert? The same way Adam and Eve were given a choice in the garden? The same way the disciples had a choice to stand beside Jesus or to deny or betray him. Our God is a God of choice and free will. And I think God knows that the more practice we have at difficult choices, the more we practice our faith, the more likely we are to grow to even greater heights and depths than we imagined.

In truth, just as there's no evidence in the text to suggest that God confuses the people's language and scatters them to punish them, there's also no evidence in the text that says God is testing them. Why God did what God did is something we'll never know. We can't control God or the laws of nature nor the behavior of other people that affects us. What we can control is our behavior and actions, our response to what happens. So just for today, humor me, and let's read this

text not as punishment but as a challenge, an opportunity.

Let's imagine what would have happened if the people in Genesis 11 had had a different response when their language was confused. What if their response had NOT been, "*Oh well, we can no longer talk to one another; I guess we need to go our separate ways and just start building up our own new cities and towers in separate places,*" but rather, "*Oh wow, this is difficult. I can't understand what you're saying. Let me try a different way of communicating. Or let me sit here beside you and listen to and try to learn your language. Let's figure out how to communicate - how to speak and listen to one another. Let's stay in this, together, even though it's difficult, until we figure it out. We've got a great thing going here with this tower, and let's not let this challenge deter us from our vision.*"

God knows that we have the capacity within ourselves to stay in the conversation, even when we are speaking different languages and coming from different places - it's one of the

amazing things about humans...our capacity for language and translation. God KNOWS this because God created us this way. We see on Pentecost that God knows that we have this ability because God sends the Spirit down to show people, to remind us all, that even as we are diverse and speak different languages and have different ideas, when we allow the Spirit of God to fall on us and come into our midst, when we look to God for power and strength, then we see, as did the people on Pentecost, that we don't all have to speak the same language or look the same or believe the same to understand one another. The miracle of Pentecost is NOT that the people all started speaking the same language; it's that they all could understand one another as they spoke *different* languages. It was the miracle of understanding in the midst of diversity, not the forcing of uniformity or conformity.

So what IF this story in Genesis 11 was the first opportunity we had to embody this possibility and we just missed the opportunity?

*"This is only the beginning,"* God says. *"Nothing will be impossible for them."* God knew the people had the potential to rise above the challenge of communication; God believed in the people. But the people didn't believe in themselves. They caved into the challenging circumstances and took the easy way out - scattering from those who were different than them and sticking with those who they could understand easily.

What if they had stayed? What if they had figured out how to talk to one another? What would that tower look like today? What more could have been possible?

I think, perhaps more than any other text I can think of, this Adventure in the Sky (that ended up with a crash landing chaotic mess on earth), could have stayed in the sky, could have stayed as a vision of possibility and spiritual growth that we could have all look up to, IF the people had made a different choice in that moment. If they hadn't let the circumstance of their confused and different languages keep them from communicating until

they could find that shared purpose again, even if they maintained their differing perspectives.

Now I admit that my interpretation of this text today is influenced in large part by the moment in history in which we find ourselves. This weekend, we are swinging on the hinge between the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention. We have heard the language of one people this past week, and we will hear the language of another people this coming week. Within these two dominant languages, are of course, varying dialects and nuanced perspectives, but no one can deny that our country is completely divided right now in our language, our identity, our purpose, our beliefs, our ethics, our priorities, our loyalties. We are so divided that we have chosen just to scatter into our own cities and build our own towers - creating divergent visions for our country, rather than staying in the conversation until we can understand one another - or at least listen to each other - so that maybe, just

maybe, we could share in some common purpose.

Our leadership, our media, every force in our culture, wants us to think that it's Us Versus Them. But that is not God's vision. That's not the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We cannot believe that narrative.

We probably all have relationships in our lives where the political divide feels so deep that we can't even talk about it. So we scatter; we disperse; we choose to put that topic under the table or table it all together because it's too difficult.

We are at a moment in our history, and we are at a moment as a people of faith, where we must believe in what God is telling the people of Babel here...that *"this is just the beginning...that nothing is impossible for us."* Everything around us is telling us that this is the end. Heck, it even feels apocalyptic; natural disasters and climate change, vitriolic divisions in government, a global pandemic.

But Scripture reveals to us today that God is reminding us of a different vision, a different reality - that we must believe and cling to---that *this is the beginning*, not the end...that coming together is still yet possible, not impossible. We cannot be complacent in this moment.

It goes without saying that as citizens we must vote. Even more, as people of faith we must be vocal and commit to stay in the conversation. We must listen to and find ways to communicate with people across the aisle because that is part of our proclamation that every single person is beloved by God and created in the image of God and every single person receives God's grace and forgiveness. We're called to ensure that every person knows they are valued - no matter who they are, where they come from, who they love, what their skin color is or what language they speak. None of us is exempt from God's love. And none of us is exempt from God's commandment to love others - even those we might name as enemies. If we can commit to the lens of love, if we can use the Spirit of God's

love as the interpretative key to keeping the conversation open and going, then I believe we will see what God is trying to show us - that this is only the beginning.

But people don't believe this is possible anymore. People feel like our country is a lost cause. Maybe this is you. And if it is, trust me, I get it. I'm there many days, if not most days, myself. I'm preaching to myself too!

As people of faith we cannot succumb to this despairing belief because God never gives up on us. God does not believe in lost causes. We have to keep finding ways to honor our diversity, not seek to erase it, and in honoring it, find a common understanding and purpose that affirms all that is good about us. Not even for the sake of our country, although that is important, but for the sake of bringing the kin-dom of God to earth as it is in heaven. It's not just about the United States of America. It's about the beloved people of God. This is our calling. To stay in the conversation. No matter how confusing or chaotic. No matter how difficult. We have

to listen to each other and learn from one another and draw towards one another, not away.

This doesn't mean that every conversation is one that we have to stay in ourselves. There are times where it may not be safe or healthy for you to stay in a conversation where hatred is directed at you or where your dignity is not honored or valued. But this is why we are in this together. We aren't individually responsible for all the conversations, but we are responsible to stay in THE conversation - some conversation - with whomever we can - and for those with whom we have to end the conversation for now - we still cannot write them off as evil or unchangeable or speak hatred about them. We must believe in their redemption and belovedness too. There are indeed clear times where what a person does or says causes harm and that disqualifies them from the positions they hold or the relationships they are in, but nothing anyone does or says ever disqualifies them from God's love or grace.

When we feel like writing someone off, when we feel like

walking away, when things feel so divided and lopsided that it seems no bridge can be built - we must remember that our faith calls us to a third way, a way of love, a way of commitment, a way of staying in the conversation, The way of Christ - who talked to and sought out conversations with those who were different than him, and who taught us to not throw the first stone, and yes who also sometimes turned some tables. Staying in the conversation is not always pretty or polite...and it's not about perfection...it's about presence.

God believes in us. Do we believe in ourselves? God has given us the capacity to do amazing things when we come together with common purpose. We've been given that common purpose in the greatest commandment: to love God and love others. In every conversation and every choice, we must ask ourselves - is this the best way to love God and love others?

We will flail about and we will fail at times, but what matters is that we are faithful to the effort and faithful to others...because

God is faithful to us...and God sees potential and possibility in every one of us. This is the good news. This is grace. This is gumption.

I know right now the world feels like constant Babel-esque chaos and confusion, but let us remember, proclaim, and believe that *“This is only the beginning...and that anything is possible...”*

May it be so, because truly, it MUST be so...for the sake of God’s kin-dom, for the sake of us all. Amen.