

Some 40 years ago we served a church on the growing edge of St. Louis County. Since the community was teeming with young families and small children, we formed a Mother's Day Out program in which I made a number of very young friends. I recall the beauty of one spring day when we took the children outside after a long winter's hibernation and the sheer joy with which they greeted the warm sunlight. There was a dance reminiscent of Snoopy's ode to joy—arms out, faces turned to the sun, the look of sheer ecstasy on their faces. I also recall another day when we ventured outside to find a number of leaves on the ground after a wind storm. Little Lynn picked up a leaf and began to study it closely. Remembering my recent seminary classes in children's education, I sought to spur her curiosity. "Where did the leaf come from?" I asked. Since she was at church and I was an obviously religious person, she responded with more than a little piety: "G-o-d," she said in long and holy tones. I was devastated. I had been taught to encourage children to think and to spur them on as they learned about the world around them. I was thoroughly convinced that there was no conflict between faith and the knowledge they would gain about the physical world and how it got here and how it works. I wasn't quite ready to launch into a science and faith discussion with three-year-old Lynn, but I was prepared to begin laying the groundwork; and here she had given me the stereotypical answer that religious educators assured me could squelch learning not only about her world, but also about God. I was not unlike the parent who stands poised, ready to leap when her child asks the monumental question "Where did I come from?" only to be disappointed on learning that the child's question had to do with geography, not biology. I was crushed.

The questions addressed in Genesis, the book of Beginnings, are something on the order of children's first questions about the world and the sea of human relationships in which they find themselves. The questions of how the world came to be and how the good, the bad and the ugly came to be are basic to positioning ourselves for life. Recognizing that everything is not as it should be, the book of Beginnings asks questions about creation, the appearance of sin and evil and the origins of human suffering. "How could it be," Genesis asks, "that in a world that is the handiwork of a loving and powerful God, women suffer and die in childbirth?" "How could it be that in a world fashioned and governed by God, human beings toil to eke out a living, only to have everything they have worked for wiped out by drought and cruel famine?" "Why do human beings plot and connive and wreak havoc upon one another?" And "why," as the psalmist puts it, "do the nations rage?" Genesis's stories in answer to such questions are called etiological myths, stories told to explain how things came to be the way they are.

During these weeks of Lent, we have been journeying through the early stories of Genesis. We have been seeking to get underneath the stories to the pressing questions that brought the stories to birth; for you see, we are not too far removed from those questions. If we are honest, and it's good to be honest in church, we still struggle with the contradictions of human existence today. Evil and suffering and human division and warfare still tear at our lives; and in the dark night of the soul, we, too, search heaven and earth for answers. How frankly tragic it has been that over the centuries the church has too often put the stories of beginnings into a strait jacket. Failing to grasp that they are given to us to spur our imaginations, our thinking about God and God's world, we have used them as barriers to inquiry and confronted honest souls wrestling with them with the stark choice of taking them (and our interpretation of them) or leaving them. In the process, we have strayed far from the creativity, the open inquiry and searching that spawned them. Distant from the Israel that knows faith to be an ongoing wrestling match with God, we have turned the stories into a glass ceiling beyond which one dare not go in search of God and truth. What a shame. What a loss.

This morning as we turn to the story of Babel, we do so seeking both to get at the questions that brought it to birth and the questions that press in upon our lives today. Why do the nations rage? Why do human beings spend so much time building walls of enmity that set neighbor against neighbor, race against race, north against south, nation against nation? Could it be that such enmity, such division is somehow a part of God's design? Could it be that it bears witness to the pettiness of a God made jealous by human collaboration?

"Come," the people on the plain of Shinar said, "let us make bricks, and . . . build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and . . . make a name for ourselves ." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower and said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing . . . will now be impossible for them. . . . The LORD confused the language of all the earth; and . . . scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Are the differences between the peoples of the world God's punishment? Is the God of the Bible, the God that we seek to serve, threatened by human achievement? Do we do best to restrict ourselves to a simple life of faith and put away high flung visions of grandeur? Is this the message of Babel? Christian interpreters over the centuries have tended to paint the sin of Babel as *hybris*—human pride. Pride in the skill of firing bricks, a significant accomplishment in the ancient world, fired human zeal to build a city, and not just a city, but also a tower into the heavens—a tower not unlike the familiar ziggurats of 6th century Israel's Babylonian captors. A seven-tiered tower whereby one ascended to the realm of the gods, the ziggurats were a reminder not just of the military superiority of the despised captor, but its supposed religious superiority as well. (Look whose gods are victorious, after all!) An ancient Israelite epic was adapted to the situation at hand, becoming in the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow, “an ironic parody, a joke at Babylon's expense” [“The Very Tall Tale of Babel and All Imperial Towers,” September 8, 2001]. “Bav-El” meaning the “gate of god,” the name of Babylon's chief city, became in the retelling of the story “Balal,” the Hebrew word “to confuse, to babble.” The despised captor's pride and joy was ridiculed as “Babble Town” and its people, the “Babble-onians.”

Putting aside the humor, however, the church's effort to interpret Babel in terms of human pride and the diversity of languages and cultures in the world as God's punishment for sin has posed serious problems. It has even gone so far as to underwrite newer oppressors—those imperial powers and cultures that see themselves as “the master race,” endowed by their creator with the military and economic dominance to subjugate lesser peoples. Theologians in South Africa shudder when they recall that the story of Babel more than any other passage from Scripture was used to defend apartheid [Cloete and Smit, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 1994]. Much on the order that the curse of Noah's son Canaan in Genesis 9 was used to defend first slavery and then within most of our own lifetime the inferiority of Blacks, equating human differences with God's punishment upon Babel freed oppressors to oppress freely and self-righteously.

The diversity of creation bears witness to a welcoming and generous God. Judging human difference to be the result of sin rather than the positive intent of God treats the wide and fascinating diversity of human beings and human cultures around the globe and within our cities as a necessary evil. It also fails to grasp the great extent to which Scripture goes in celebrating those very differences as the gift of God. Down through the centuries, Jewish interpreters have been more likely to identify the point at issue in the Babel story as “un-pride” and human anxiety (to use American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's terms) rather than pride. True, Genesis's recounting of the ancient story makes note of the builders' desire to “make a name for” themselves [v. 4]; but we should not miss, as Jewish scholar Benno Jacob points out, that as the story unfolds, the builders are less preoccupied with forcing their way into the heavens than they are concerned to huddle closely together lest they “be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” [in Bernhard Anderson, “Unity & Diversity in God's Creation: A Study of the Babel Story,” *Currents in Theology & Mission*, 1978, p. 76]. Bound by uncertainty and fear of the unknown, they seek reassurance by pulling the boundaries of their responsibility in closely to them.

Yet, every story preceding Babel, from Creation to the blessing of Noah following the flood to the Table of Nations in chapter 10 to the listing of the descendants of Shem following Babel, each story stresses God's commissioning human beings to be fruitful and multiply and *fill the earth*. At no point is the dispersion, the scattering, the differentiating a negative act on the part of God. As Bernhard Anderson puts it, “God's will for creation is diversity rather than homogeneity.” Our human differences, our different languages, nationalities, races and cultures are “welcomed as a divine blessing, just as we rejoice in the rich variety of the non-human creation: trees, plants, birds, fish, animals, heavenly bodies. The whole creation bears witness to the extravagant generosity of the Creator!” [80].

Be sure to notice, too, that the story does not end with Babel. It turns immediately to the descendants of Shem and the calling of Abraham. As with Babel, the calling is not to sit entrenched in the comfort of the familiar and safe. It is a call, if you will, to disperse, to travel from the land that Abraham knows into the unknown. “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). It is a commissioning with a blessing for Abraham and Abraham's descendants. It is a commissioning that turns Abraham and Abraham's kind into a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Hear it again in the Prophet Micah. Envisioning peoples from “many nations” coming in the last days to Zion, Micah dreamed of peace not just for Jerusalem, but for all the peoples of the earth. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (4:1-4).

So there you have it. Far from a provincial, comfortable God of the status quo, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ is the God who breathes wholeness and peace for all the children of creation. It is just there, in service to that vision that any who would serve this God must be.

In his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, Martin Luther King recalled the story of a famous novelist who died, leaving among his papers a list of plots for future stories. The most prominent plot read: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." King continued,

We have inherited a large house, a great *world house* in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu - a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace" [*Where Do We Go From Here?* p. 167].

"Dona Nobis Pacem"—"Give us peace," the Grace Chorale sang earlier in the service. In keeping with Rodney's instructions, we sang it as a prayer, coming from deep within our hearts. Still we pray: O God of grace, give us peace. And not just us and people, who look, talk, live and pray like us, but all of your children, especially your children who this day live in the midst of terrifying, crushing, never-ending warfare that saps their lives and obliterates their future. O God of grace, give us, give *them* peace! Amen.