

“Among the ruins of Babel”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-2

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I was sad. I shouldn't have been. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining. It was just that perfect temperature where it's not too cold or too hot. Jenna and I were taking Josephine for a walk in her stroller. We passed Herman Elementary School. Kids were playing on the playground. I should have been happy. I was happy. Until we noticed what we took to be an armed guard hurrying away a car and making sure all the doors were locked. Nothing bad was happening; don't worry. It was just routine. And I guess that's what made me sad. Not that the school was taking appropriate precautions, but that they had to. I was sad for the children who will never know any different.

I belong to the last generation that didn't have to do active shooter drills. I was allowed to roam my neighborhood and the woods without adult supervision, as long as I was home by dark. The doors to my elementary school, where my mom taught, were never locked. There was a certain unstructured freedom to childhood that felt both safe and exciting at the same time. As I looked at the school's locked doors and armed guard, I felt that freedom, that innocence, vanishing. And so I felt sad.

There's a lot of that going around these days: the feeling that we've lost something. Something essential. Pandemic hit, and everything fell apart. They say that, thanks to remote learning, school has forever changed. People aren't coming back to church. People are leaving their jobs, especially health officials and school board members and anyone else who has suffered the barrage of hostility that's been displayed the last two years. The relational fabric of society just wore out. Scholars say, though, that the pandemic merely accelerated changes that were already in process. The church was already declining; the pandemic simply moved up its decline by a decade or two. Even before the pandemic, we were a polarized nation of people yelling at each other. Already we had lost trust in the bedrocks of our society: democracy, education, journalism, facts, faith, even each other.

We don't recognize the world before us. It's not the one we thought we were building. The greatest nation on earth can't manage to feed our babies, or protect our children from being shot.

We want to know: How do we get back to what once was? To Walter Cronkite, and civil discourse, and children playing in the woods, and full sanctuaries, and a nation that sent a man to the moon, passed civil rights legislation, and opened for people a path to home ownership, college education, and upward mobility?

The people of Babel probably asked a similar question. They worked so hard to build that great city and its tower stretching to the clouds, to build something to be proud of, something safe. They were one people, united, with one language. They didn't have to worry about the

differences that can cause conflict or misunderstanding. They were all the same. It was a good life, a peaceful life.

And then it all fell apart. Suddenly, they were speaking different languages and were spread far away from each other. People spoke, but no one understood. Unable to understand each other, they turned on each other. War broke out, violence and poverty. The world no longer made sense, and they too wanted to know: How do we get back? How do we rebuild this tower?

Two months ago, *The Atlantic* published an article by social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt, titled “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.” It’s a good title, isn’t it? It does feel like we have collectively lost brain cells. Haidt uses Babel as a metaphor for America today, as a people “unable to communicate, condemned to mutual incomprehension.” He speaks of the split between red America and blue America, but he says it’s bigger than that; it’s about the break-down of the institutions of our society, everything from elections to education to healthcare.

But as I read the article and resonated with so much of it, one thought kept nagging at me. You see, the author treats the fall of Babel as unequivocally a bad thing. He assumes that Babel—and its singular language and walled city—was a good thing.

But when you read the story of Babel, it is clear that Babel doesn’t fall by accident. God’s the one who knocks it down. (In actuality, the text doesn’t say what happens to the tower; it says that God confuses their language, scatters them, and leaves the city abandoned, which really is the equivalent of knocking it down.) And God knocks it down for a very specific reason. God speaks of pride and unbridled power and this concern for the people speaking one language—concern for uniformity, conformity. God’s seen this before. After all, these are the descendants of Noah, and before Noah, there were other cities, and other groups of people who all thought the same way and acted together; they became mobs, and they attacked anyone who didn’t belong.

God knocks down Babel to disrupt that uniformity. And yes, in doing so, God unleashes chaos. But God unleashes something else too: diversity. Because the question, of course, is: Who wasn’t included in Babel? Who was being kept out? Whose languages, whose stories, were not allowed when there was only one language? And we could ask the same thing about us. Yeah, 20th century America was great for some people, but not for a whole lot of others.

It’s like this fact I recently learned: in all of Amish history, there have been only two murders. It’s got to be the lowest crime rate for any society in existence. Good for them! And I like the Amish; many are wonderful people. But you also have to ask: What was the price of that peace? Uniformity, little to no rights for women, abuse, no place for dissent or individual expression, and God help you if you’re gay.

God created the world to be diverse. It’s the first page of Scripture. God created us to be different, knowing that those differences can cause conflict, but believing that the world was better with many colors. Differences are what move us forward, challenge and awaken us, foment beauty and genius. Haidt himself says that democracy requires substantive interaction

with people who think differently; it's the only way we transcend confirmation bias, progress closer to truth, and create community.

You can't sing a song without different notes.

And so we come to Pentecost. On that day, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and empowered them to speak in other languages, such that everyone understood each other. This isn't the reversal of Babel; this is its culmination, its full purpose finally revealed. Pentecost is when that diversity, created in Babel, is lifted up. It's not ended, but is made understood.

It is not a return. Babel is not rebuilt. One language is not restored. Rather, there are many languages still. Many stories, many voices, many peoples—of many ideas and backgrounds. Acts devotes great time to describing the diversity: people from all over the known world. And yet they understand each other.

The problem wasn't that Babel fell. The problem was that the people were so busy mourning the ruins that they never looked to see what was happening around them. They thought this new diversity—this multitude of perspectives and voices—was a threat, when in reality it was an opportunity. A chance to learn something new. A chance to recognize mutual need and be humbled by each other. A chance to experience God in all of God's mysterious multitude. A chance to love, and to work hard for that love.

What if—in the midst of our own ruins, our own fragmented society, our own incredible differences—we decided not to be afraid? What if we chose not to rebuild? What if we saw this as our Pentecost moment? God is inviting us to learn to live and thrive in these ruins, to see what new thing may grow, not a return to uniformity, to suppression of other voices and languages and stories and lives, but rather the multiplicity of stories and languages and lives. This is our chance to be a community that works to listen and understand each other—and through each other, perceive the works of God.

In the ruins of Babel, there is much to mourn. But there is also even more to hope. For these ruins bear the seeds of a better future, of a more inclusive, loving, diverse, and joyful day. So do not seek to rebuild. Rather, look for what is growing in the ashes. Water it. Look for the others among the ruins. Know them. They are the key. We don't need them to be like us; we just need them to be. **Amen.**