

Between Babel and Belonging

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11

Every so often, they do surveys about what people fear the most. I wonder if this recent list is the one you would guess. At the top is the fear of: corrupt government officials, not having enough money, being in a time of war, and a loved one becoming seriously ill or dying. That's a heavy list. In fact, it would seem that these 4 or 5 are staples on these lists year after year.

We have a lot of fears. On some surveys, our fears can get pretty specific. Listen to these most common ones: The fear of: Public speaking, heights, snakes and spiders, going to the dentist, and clowns. Our fears can be pretty specific. Then imagine with me for a moment a worst-case scenario where you had to give a speech... to a crowd of clowns... with your back to a ledge... with snakes and spiders at your feet... Oh and you have a dentist appointment later that day. You can relax your shoulders and begin to breathe again. We have a lot of fears.

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at the farewell speeches Jesus gives to his friends before he is crucified. The disciples are understandably fearful—for this new unknown that awaits them, for their own safety... Scholars say some form of the words "Do not fear" or "Do not be afraid" appears 365 times throughout the Bible? Is there any coincidence to having one of these reassurances for every day of the year? Jesus tells his disciples—and by extension, us—"Do not be afraid...I am sending the Holy Spirit to be with you." I've been wondering over this for some time.

What we know of fear is that it is a fundamental aspect of human nature, given to us through our evolutionary past. In other words, it's part of what has helped us survive. On this alone, living without fear

isn't just a matter of talking ourselves into an impossibility—similar to how we don't just talk ourselves into belief.

There's a famous Bob Newhart skit where he plays a therapist counseling a young woman who comes in with a list of concerns. At the top of the list is the fear of being buried alive in a box. As it turns out, my kids have recently expressed this same fear because of that alarming scene in *A Christmas Carol* when this happens to Scrooge. Newhart prescribes the young woman two words to cure her fear: "Stop it!" Well, this just gets her a little agitated and she tries to talk to him but he keeps repeating, "Stop it!" Finally, she can't take any more so she asserts herself and stands up to him. Newhart offers to give her ten words to help her a little more: "Stop it, or I'll bury you alive in a box!" We too might get a little agitated at the suggestion to just "not be afraid."

John Calvin, the great reformer, questioned how to think about fear given how Jesus earnestly prays to the point of bloody tears in the garden, who was heavily stricken with dread, and was sorrowful even to death. Fear is a powerful human emotion. And on this Pentecost Sunday, I want to better understand just what the Spirit is wanting to do in a fearful people.

Winston Churchill said, "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision." One stops you dead in your tracks, puts you on the defensive; and with the other there is forward movement, no matter the dread. Did Jesus know—through those years of spending quality time with his disciples—that there would be a tendency for them to isolate themselves and wall-up in the threat of what was coming next? Is this how, sometimes, we react with our own fears?

In the Scripture texts this morning, we have two examples of how fear can drive us. One from the Old Testament in the book of Genesis and one from the New, in the book of Acts. And both of these passages were marked by a critical time of major transition—that tension of being in-between the No Longer and the Not Yet. These can be times filled with uncertainty and great anxiety, even fear and

dread. For the early church in the book of Acts, the disciples were overwhelmed with confusion and fear, living between what was and what was yet-to-come. In the book of Genesis, a widespread flood just devastated the earth and God's people were set back on dry ground. Yet, there was now great uncertainty and new levels of fear, despite God's promises.

So, if I told you that two groups were on the move after the flood in Genesis: One would be led by the descendants of Shem and the other by a guy named Nimrod, which one would you guess ends up going the wrong way? There's a reason why the name Nimrod never made it into the Book of Baby Names but instead becomes synonymous with stupidity. It says, Nimrod's group headed eastward, which was further and further away from the garden and therefore away from God. But in this new uncertainty, their intention was to quickly locate a place to isolate and stabilize their situation. You see, one response to fear is control, to control those feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity, to control their interactions with God, who they believed to have caused such devastation and dispersement in the first place by the flood waters.

Now headed eastward, this group was bent on not being scattered anymore. That was their fear. They wanted to be a homogenous people—having one language that each could understand and having the same ethnic origin. And with this ease of communication and uniformity, they set out to build a tower in the plains of Shinar. It says that it was their goal to build its “top in the heavens”—This was perhaps not so much to reach to God as is the common thought here, because remember they were trying to move away from God. It was likely so they could rival God or at least impress God and others. They wanted to make a name for themselves.

Have you ever been tempted by pride to want to make a name for yourself? When our earthly worth is based on how notable we can be, what we can accomplish by the world's standards, how many social media followers we have, we just about take it for granted that we all have to be tower-builders in this world.

They were making a name for themselves. They used the latest technology in architecture—stones could only be so stable in past building projects. They instead invented bricks which were fired thoroughly to be extra secure. These could be stacked much higher and with more stability. And impressive this tower was! It says God even came to check it out and said: “Look, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” In other words, the sky was the limit.

Just a couple of years ago, I sat in a classroom with Dr. Cornel West at Union Seminary, and he was teaching a course on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian—who also happened to be a Union student many decades ago. It was one of my favorite classes I’ve taken. If you don’t know the name, Bonhoeffer led the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler during the Second World War, until he was found out by the gestapo and thrown into a German concentration camp where he was later killed.

Writing to his friend from prison, Bonhoeffer feared a “world come of age.” What he saw was a rapidly developing society that no longer had a need for God. He called it a movement toward the “autonomy of man.” Bonhoeffer wrote: “The movement that began [in prior centuries]...towards the autonomy of man...has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man (humanity) has learnt to deal with itself in all questions of importance without recourse to...‘God’.” In other words, humanity had become so impressive in its accomplishments that it no longer needed God for anything—or so they thought.

They certainly made a name for themselves—oppressive more than impressive—and the traumas of the Second World War will never be forgotten. Hitler’s Germany was driven by reactionary fear of the other and a resolve to create a homogenous people for the sake of control and uniformity.

You see, the Tower of Babel in Genesis is not just a tower; it’s a mindset: A resistance to difference and diversity in favor of control

and security. How true it is of our own time that we live in the fears of our lack of control and information. Think of all the phobias which marginalize so many in our world and lead to violence: Xenophobia (fear of strangers or foreigners), Transphobia (fear of transgender persons), Islamophobia (fear or dislike of Islam or Muslims), Homophobia (fear or dislike of homosexual people), Fatphobia (fear or dislike of larger bodies), and the list goes on and on...

Before long, our lists of phobias keep us constantly in a reactionary state against almost everyone else that we don't quite understand. And instead of seeking to understand at the level of their humanity, we start to build towers. The stoic philosopher Seneca said: "There are more things...likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality." Most often, the imagined threat of others we don't understand is not based in any sense of reality, it is simply a lack of information and proximity to the unknown.

And the Spirit comes with the power to live no longer from a place of reactionary fear. Those fears may still be present, but in them we can choose courage over isolation. Daily, we are deciding between prideful striving which will only accept uniformity or Spirit-filled unity, that sees difference as a strength, not something to overcome.

God's disruption to the Genesis tower project isn't destruction, it's redirection. God doesn't fear diversity; God creates it. And what the people feared is just what they needed, to be scattered. This is often understood as punishment, but what if it's grace? The scattering fulfills that original call in Genesis 1:28 to "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the whole earth..."

In Acts, the Spirit comes in a cacophony of languages. There is a sense of belonging because they aren't having to speak the language of their oppressors anymore but were understood on their own terms. This was not just true for the Jews who were there in Jerusalem. Even the crowd that gathered, the text says, heard their own

languages being spoken. The Spirit was inspiring diversity no ICE raid could break up.

Can you imagine what it means to those outside the church doors to see a people “speaking their language”, so to speak? We got a glimpse of this yesterday at the Leonia Pride Day. Many of us helped at a table with arts and crafts and celebrated the community in all its beautiful diversity and colorful pride. We were mixed in with many other civic organizations and vendors. It was a Spirit-filled event.

When we are constructing Spirit-led community, we keep in mind Bonhoeffer’s warning: that the church is only the church to the extent that “it is there for others,” participating at the level of everyday life of ordinary people. Daily we are choosing between uniformity and unity, between conformity and community. We are set between Babel and belonging.

Stephen Schwartz, in his musical Godspell, wrote a song called Beautiful City. A friend sent me a clip of this song being sung as a solo at their Easter service just a few weeks ago. At first, I found it an odd choice for an Easter worship service, but then I thought more about its lyrics:

“We can build a beautiful city,
Yes we can, yes we can.
We can build a beautiful city
Not a city of angels,
but we can build a city of man.”

Aside from its non-inclusive language, this song offers an alternative to the Tower city of Genesis. The Beautiful City seeks no name for itself. It does not strive to reach to the heavens but situates itself at the level of humanity. This is what it looks like to be a people of the resurrection: a renewed people sent back into the world, not those looking to escape from it.

For all the talk about deconstruction in recent years—what are we constructing? What city are we building... as Christians... as the

Presbyterian Church in Leonia... as individuals... in our workplaces, at home... Fear, I see, is inevitable. But will we allow the Spirit to embolden us to use that powerful emotion for good... To let it move us—not to seek control and isolation... but move us into courage, into one another? It is always a choice.

A fitting way to close is with words from the Prayer of St. Francis. These are Babel-breaking words and what true belonging looks like:

That we would be made into instruments of peace;
And when there is hatred, that we sow love;
When there is injury, pardon;
When there is doubt, faith;
When there is despair, hope;
When there is darkness, light;
And when there is sadness, joy.

That life not just center ourselves:
May it be that we not seek
To be consoled as to console others;
To be understood as to understand others;
To be loved as to love others.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in giving away life that we are born to eternal life.

Friends, may it be so.