

People of Babel - People of Pentecost

We are people of Babel. But what does it mean to be people of Babel? I think that can first be found in verse 3 in their decision to begin to make a city. They have decided they don't want to scatter among the earth, but instead stay together, build a city and make a name for themselves. Previously they had been told by God to scatter. That was God's will to populate the earth and to be caretakers of the earth. But here we see open defiance of that.

Sometimes it is hard to accept God's plans when we can't see the larger picture, especially when we are in a vulnerable state. In the previous few chapters we are told the story of Noah. The world had been wiped out. They had been building back their numbers. Perhaps there was some lingering doubt about the goodness of God. Regardless, they again chose to disobey as they had which led to the flood in the first place. But this time, they decided that they would build a fortified city and make a name for themselves. Perhaps they thought that in doing that they could establish themselves and assert their will enough to be left alone.

We will make a name for ourselves. Names are always so important in the Bible and in declaring this it is easy to understand that what they wanted was to control their own destiny, to do what they wanted. They liked being together and thought that they could do it alone, by asserting their will and by asserting their power in the things they could control.

This is what we find in Babel. A people that is again thinking that they know best, just like Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. Making decisions that went against what God had instructed. Thinking that they knew best. Arrogance. Defiance. A sense of entitlement and self-importance. Reliance on self and not on God. These are some of the things that we inherited from the people of Babel.

We see it daily with politicians who claim to be Christian, but instead demonstrate those same qualities that the people of Babel did - arrogance, defiance, entitlement and self-importance, trying to make themselves equal to God. We see it in capitalism where corporations and rich individuals hoard the wealth instead of using it for the greater good. Babel is what makes injustice thrive. It's what causes wars to start and to

continue year after year. It's what makes the distinction between rich and poor. We see Babel at work in our desire for dominance in the economic world and in the desire for military dominance. Babel is what makes us think we can judge and condemn others. Babel is what makes enemies.

And Babel is also in us. We see it in ourselves when we choose to not do what God has instructed us to do, such as when we choose to do the easy thing instead of the difficult thing, which may make the world of difference in someone else's life; by choosing to stay in the metaphoric house that we built instead of venturing out into the wider world as God instructs. We see it in our need for more - bigger house, better car, more exotic vacations, more stuff. We are addicted to Babel. We grew up believing that Babel is the God of true spirituality - rugged individualism, individual thought. Not dependence on God. Not on obedience to God. Not in giving one's self over to the Lord of Lords. Name above all Names. Unfortunately, we all have a Babel component.

However, we also have Pentecost. Pentecost is a snapshot of the opposite. The Holy Spirit comes to everyone - the intellectual and the unsophisticated, the committed and the apathetic, the fundamentalist and the pagan, the man and the woman and all those in between - and for an instant we all speak the same language. Because when we commit to God, we can both speak and hear in the one language that brings us together. God's language of love.

Right after Pentecost, the early church changed the way they did things. They got rid of their class distinctions. They held all of their money together and gave it out to people as needed. The Kairos, the grace, of God came and they saw the world in a different way. The Spirit moved among them and they no longer saw each other as people to be suspicious of, but as fellow children of God. They had a new freedom and a chance to be a different kind of community. They did not have to go back to Babel.

However, the unity of that day of Pentecost would not last. The unity that came with the start of a new church, a new body of believers in Christ, would not last. Babel was too familiar. A few short chapters later in Acts, members of the early church fought against each other as some said that it was better for the new foreign converts to be circumcised and stick to the tired old dietary laws of the Jewish culture.

What God wants is for us to trust Him fully with our lives. To obey even when we don't know what is before us, but to step into that future, to "Scatter" if you will and trust that what is out there contains blessings. Your life and your future is not within the City of Babel that you have constructed for yourself. It is in the life of Pentecost.

I know that is asking a lot of you and of myself. For we are both children of Pentecost and children of Babel. We long for the ideal of Pentecost, but we revisit the the comfort and predictability of Babel.

But we should always be nurturing the Pentecost side.

I remember reading a story about Mr. Rogers. Well, this was more on Mr. Rogers's wife. She was being interviewed and the interviewer asked her what it was like to be married to a man such as he - so kind, so caring; a truly remarkable human being.

She would get so tired of questions like this. She replied that he was no saint; that he had moments when he would get angry or disappointed. He was not immune to negative emotions. In essence, what she was saying was that he was human. But, she added, what made him different is that he chose to be different. He chose love and compassion and kindness. He woke up every day making that decision and praying that the Holy Spirit would do a good work within him so that he could be the kind of person that not only he wanted to be, but more importantly what God wanted him to be.

We are people of Babel, but we are also people of Pentecost. We have the power within to be better, to love more fully, to show compassion in action, despite the dangers. We have the power to live as fully and as authentically as those believers of the early church, to be and do all that God commands and commends to us because we have the strength and the wisdom and the power through the Holy Spirit that is within us.

We are called to gather and scatter. It is a continual pattern. Gathering in the Lord's name, scattering to share the Good News. Too often the emphasis is on the disciples being given the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in other languages; but the really miracle was that God made a way for the disciples to share the Good News. The emphasis should always be on the hearing.

Live as people of Pentecost. Relying on the Holy Spirit to give you compassion and to bring you to action to care for those who God desires to draw into himself. People of Pentecost, filled with the HOly Spirit, empowered to speak in God's name. Able to stand up to injustice and evil. This is what it means to be children of Pentecost. Amen