

“Faith Seeking Understanding”

July 30, 2017

In the Beginning: God’s Family Drama series

So I’m at the mall. We’re at the mall. Doing the playland drill. You know what I mean, they have this area with that’s all like nerf. So the kids can all run around crazy and sort of just bounce off things. It makes for some really precious moments. Truly. I’m playing with Lillian and I see this Dad. With his kid. And his phone. Texting or something. You know what I mean? Have you seen this?

Our Scripture this morning is one of the weirder ones in our Bible. On one hand it makes for a great coloring book. We were even thinking about building a little tower for the kids. Because why not? This is one of those stories that grips the imagination. A city, a tower. Hey, God even comes down and checks it out!

On the other hand, this story makes for some difficult reading. So...is unity a bad thing? Maybe we should consider a name change for the music festival? And if working together is so bad, the punishment is...diversity? Ok, so maybe I’m being a little simplistic here, but a close reading of this familiar story begs the question my bride posed as we were jogging: “So what is this story about anyway?”

What is this story about? And why would your friendly neighborhood Congregation Care Coordinator want to talk about it?

Let’s start with what it is not about. It’s not about the tower. We know the dimensions of the ark and of the Temple to a point where we can build scale models (or with the ark, not so scale models) of them. Last week we learned that not only did Jacob and mom lure a hungry Esau with food, but that it was stew, no, red stew, no red stew with lentils, and a side of bread. I’m surprised they didn’t post a picture of it on Pinterest. Hashtag Jacob. Hashtag And Mom.

But outside of the building materials used, we know next to nothing about this structure. “A tower that reaches to the heavens” can be taken as literally as our word for any tall building, a sky-scraper. And check what happens at the end, “and they stopped building the city.” There isn’t even any more mention of the tower!

So it is not about the tower. Guess what, it’s probably not about languages either. There is some rigorous debate as to what is meant by the seemingly redundant “the whole world had one language and a common speech.” One theory is that this describes something called a lingua franca, which I totally had to google. But basically it’s a language lots of people agree to have in common for a shared purpose. A modern equivalent is aviation English. All pilots and air traffic controllers speak English to each other. Think about it. A Lufthansa flight inbound Tokyo, trying to avoid the Air India flight outbound. What language should they speak? Turns out the airplane was invented by some guys from Ohio. So English it is. This story might describe the disruption of a primitive lingua franca. Another theory is that this is a simplified story explaining why people speak different languages in the first place.

Regardless of the anthropology behind it, there is an elephant in the room if we make the story about all the languages. Diversity becomes a punishment. Maybe not explicitly, but at some level. We’re all different, and that is a bad thing for [fill in the blank reason]. So the solution is, well terrifying. We should all be the same. And of course by “the same,” I mean, be like me.

There is no doubt that our world is broken and fractured and sometimes downright hostile. I was visiting with someone who was telling me about a loved one who was taken by a particularly aggressive cancer in a matter of months. They said, "I had no idea that such a monster existed on this earth." We live in a world where I am sitting with one of the most thoughtful and intelligent, caring and agnostic people I know. "So what about the Holocaust then?" It's a fair question.

If our world wasn't hostile enough, we turn on one another. Sending our young men and women to far flung areas to kill and be killed. Sowing all kinds of -isms. Racism, sexism, ageism. And -isms we don't even have names for yet. Some do it explicitly. Others of us may be rather open-minded about a lot of things, but it is still a human tendency to naturally fear difference at some level.

This story speaks to that fear, and in a subtle way, may even participate in it. Bab-ilm comes from the Mesopotamian for "the gates of God." This story casts that culture in a different light, saying that Babel instead means confused. Ouch. You know, it's because it's those people. That talk that way. That look that way. That think that way. Not us.

Our world can be a scary place. True. But there is another truth.

Our. World. Is. Beautiful.

Sometimes I hear the question, "How could you believe in miracles? Or, how come God used to work miracle back then?" Ever hear something like this? Ever ask something like this?

We are surrounded by miracles. I get to see our world through the eyes of my favorite scientist.

Yeah, probability that she'd show up on at least one slide this morning: 100%.

But the everyday miracles. Like algae. It's that green stuff on the bayou. Mama can point it out. And it's green. Everybody. Go like this. [inhale]. Seriously, try it. [inhale]. Did you know that the algae, the trees, the grass, anything that is green. They make the air we breathe.

Now, go with me. [exhale] Feel that. We make the air that the plants breathe. Seriously. How cool is that?

Our world is beautiful. God placed us on this garden world to work, and to play in, alongside him. And here is the best part. We are some of God's favorite miracles. The rhythm of creation. Evening, morning it was good. Evening, morning it was good. Male and female, in God's image...and it was very good.

Is it any wonder that God tells us to go explore! The big problem with the builders in this story isn't so much that they were building something. God wants us to be creative, it's why he made us so naturally curious and inventive. The big problem is that they refused to go out into their world, one commentary says "humanity stopped exploring." Let's try to imagine a little of God's motive then.



It's like when we took Lillian to Fredrick Meijer Gardens in the height of butterfly season. Fredrick Meijer Gardens, is awesome. Really. Did you know they have a drinking fountain? And stairs? You can go up and down them. Seriously. When we tell Lillian, "you've got to see these butterflies" it is not so much "you have got to see these butterflies" but it's "you've gotta see these butterflies." Our world is so beautiful.

This is one of my favorite spaces. The cathedral in Washington DC. The creation window is stained glass in a gothic rose design. But it is infused with 10,000 prisms. The colors refracted and reflected change over the course of the day as the sun passes over. It symbolizes God's continuing work in creation and its ongoing change.



We are all made in the image of God. And. We are all different. How those two facts reconcile is just like the dance of color and light on the cathedral wall. We each reflect God in some way that is unique. How would our world look if we believed that?

It would look very different from the world that the ancients saw when they built that tower. "They found a plain in Shinar and settled there." That was it. Let's bunker down. They put their faith in stuff. Their city. Their technology. Those bricks. Look how excited they got. We just invented fired clay. Woo-hoo. Multi-story! Archaeologists tell us that a Babylonian tower (called a Ziggurat) could have reached as tall as the Amway Grand. Not too shabby for the middle Bronze Age. Except that it is gone. Clay does not last. And remember, it's not about the tower anyway.

It's about three words: pink bunny pajamas.

You know this story? Ralphy. Christmas. He gets these ridiculous pink bunny pajamas from Aunt Whomever, right? What did my Mom always tell me about less-than-ideal presents: "It's the thought that counts."

It IS the thought that counts. And Ralphy's Aunt Whomever wasn't thinking of Ralphy. She couldn't see past her own way of thinking. It



wasn't what she did, or gave. It was why she did it. It was the motive. And the motive was not good.

The tower builders at Babel were cut from the same cloth. They took no interest in exploring. They took no interest in filling the earth and cultivating it. In making it better. They instead turned their focus inward. And when you focus inward, you start building walls. It's wasn't about what they built. Or even how they built it. It was about why they built it. Build enough walls and you start loving the walls more than people.

They built out of two motives: pride and fear. "So that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." They put their faith in the latest technological breakthroughs. I am sure glad we don't have THAT problem anymore. And they built their faith on closing off the outside world and focusing only on people like them. Again, at least we don't deal with that problem either, right? Our fortresses become our echo chambers.

Pride and fear. And look at God's solution.

It's the prisms in the glass. Do you see it? 10,000 crystals reflecting the light perpetual shining. Each in its own remarkable way. Dancing across the cold stone as the sun rises and sets.

God's solution to pride in ourselves and fear of others, is an invitation to hear. To listen. To seek to understand. The focus is in hearing. Having as a starting point faith that God is in control, perhaps and especially in ways that we cannot fathom. Faith that we can see God in others, even and especially those who are very different from us. When we start looking for God in others, we start assuming the best in people. We have faith that God is at work in their life. "You gotta see these butterflies."

I remember the first time I visited Carolina Isley. This is like week 1. I had just found out that there is a Hume House and a Hume Home in Muskegon. I am here to report they are in fact not the same building. A little GPS "recalculating" later we're chatting in her room. I'm telling her that the sun is coming in the windows and it is lighting up the pictures of her family on the far wall.

So this is week 1. I've got communion Carolina, would you like that? Her face physically lights up. Oh that would be lovely. So I'm getting everything ready and at this point I have like one of those little lunch bag size cooler things and a grape juice bottle. As I am laying the elements out, Carolina says, "Isn't it great how you have such a beautiful box for Communion?" Absolutely.

There is beauty all around us. When we try to see that in others we can then begin to seek to understand more than to be understood. To listen to our sisters and to our brothers in Christ. To listen to and look at and embrace and love our world, in its good, in its bad, and even in its ugly. He's got the whole world, the whole wide world, in his hands.

Language and difference and diversity then become not a punishment, but an opportunity. Let me say this in no uncertain terms: culture is not a curse. We know this because Babel is never undone. The vision of God's Kingdom toward a hopeful future is a vision of the nations, of peoples, and of languages.

It's Isaiah 2 "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."

It's Matthew 28 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..."

It's Revelation 7 "and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language...and they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God.'"

God calls us into a faith, a faith that seeks to understand. To truly hear one another. When we read about Hagar and Ishmael, we encountered the God who sees. The Psalmist writes of the God who hears. God is the God who understands. When we listen, when we seek to understand, we join him in his working.

All it takes is stepping out in faith, looking and turning outward and having confidence that God is indeed at work in the world, and that God is inviting us to join him in that work. It allows us to tap that creative energy and start imagining how God is at work in the life of another, however difficult that might be.

So what does this look like, boots on the ground?

I was visiting a member who used to be a Sunday School teacher. She was telling me how there was a kid who was a "wild child." Everyone agreed that this kid was a real problem. Until the Sunday School teacher realized something. She told me, "It wasn't his fault, it was mine. All I had to do was to accept him for who he was, where he was at, just like Jesus accepted me." So she prayed that she could see him for who he was. Once she did, they say the transformation was almost instantaneous in the young man. He was still very wild. "If we took a trip to the camp, we all knew he would be the one who would fall in the lake." But where he used to be unruly, now he was passionate. Where he was rambunctious, he now had an abundance of energy for church.

So I'm at the mall. We're at the mall. Doing the playland drill. You know what I mean, they have this area with that's all like nerf. So the kids can all run around crazy and sort of just bounce off things. It makes for some really precious moments. Truly. I'm playing with Lillian and I am this Dad. With his kid. And his phone. Her mom is pulling the night shift in the ER, and our Cherub has just figured out how to jump off the little boat thing and "stick" the landing. I'm sending Teresa a picture of our daughter. And I can feel the Daddy shamers glaring.

So I try to keep that in mind. When I see someone doing something like that or anything else I'd be prone to judge harshly. I make up stories about strangers. Believe the best, even if it might not be true, who knows it might be? Oh, look at that woman on her phone. Isn't it wonderful how she can send a picture of her child to her husband who is forward deployed in Afghanistan? Or whatever. Something. Positive. And when it is not a stranger, look for where God is moving in their life, even when it might hurt.

So I'm at the mall. We're at the mall. Doing the playland drill. And I'm trying to start with faith, and working on understanding. I'm that Dad with his phone. You know what I mean? Have you seen this?