



THE CENTRAL PULPIT

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH | ATLANTA, GEORGIA

THREE SIMPLE WORDS

Genesis 11:1-9

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Three simple words: “Come, let us.” Not even a complete sentence. Three simple words threaten to turn the world on its head.

Before these three simple words, the ancient legend says: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” Just think, graduates, no French 101 in college. No legislation to make English the national language. No *Rosetta Stone* crash courses before the big vacation. “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” What a great ending to a story, but not this one.

“So *they* migrated from the east; *they* came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.” Who are “they” asks the ghost of my sixth grade English teacher? And for the geographers in the congregation, “Where is east?” East Jersey? East Istanbul? East Atlanta? The only thing we know from the early chapters of *Genesis* is that “east” is east of Eden.

Then the story really gets started. We Presbyterians actually have an advantage reading this story because we operate according to “we.” Want a change in the music, talk to the Worship Committee. Want someone to serve as an elder or deacon, talk to Nominating Committee. Want to suggest a building repair, mention it to the Administration Committee. Presbyterians know about committees and this story gets moving when the committee meets and speaks: “Come, let us.” “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.”

Some say this legend rails against the hubris of urban life and like Thoreau calls us “into the woods.” Others say this legend rails against making a name for ourselves, for only God gives us our name, our true identity. At one point, surely this legend did what most legends do. It explained things. It told a story about how certain things came to be, like how we ended up in one world speaking a thousand different languages. But to suggest that this story is a critique on self-actualization or urban

pride commits a serious grammatical crime, it ignores the other side of the semi-colon! “Come, let us . . . ; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

They fear being scattering across the earth. And, *they* are not alone. Who needs scattering? Who needs the headache of moving? Of packing and unpacking boxes and making new friends and learning new stories and missing those left behind and trying to learn what is done in this town and what is not? The committee meets and decides: “We’ve got a good thing going right here in Shinar and we’re not about to let anyone mess it up, even God. So, grab the mortar. Pass the pitch. Come, let us get building.”

So, they build and by the time the tower has passed the height of the Empire State Building and Sears Tower combined, the legend says: “The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the mortals had built.” The Lord had to “come down” because this magnificent structure, this epitome of architectural precision looked like just another anthill from the Lord’s vantage point. So, the Lord comes down to get a better look. And, what the Lord sees, the Lord does not like.

So, the Lord calls a meeting of the heavenly committee. And, once again we hear those three simple words – “Come, let us” – as the committee decides: “Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” According to this legend, that is what happens when humans try to bronze their uniformity and steal a divine seal of approval for staying put and remaining the same. Now, not only do they need dictionaries and lexicons, but they need translators and communication is always hard.

What happens next is usually seen as part two of the punishment as their fear is realized: “So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth.” The first story in *Genesis* gives us a clue that this scattering may not be as much of a punishment as they fear. In the first story, just after God creates the woman and man in God’s image, God says to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” “Fill the earth” is another way of saying, “scatter yourselves over the face of the earth; don’t wall yourselves off from the rest of creation; don’t build a tower that leads you away from the good creation of your God. But, *scatter!*”

Sib Towner, a former professor and fine Hebrew scholar, says: “God kicks the anthill over and the little creatures are now forced to run in every direction. From God’s point of view, the chaos is not all bad” (Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, p. 112). What they thought had unified them, now has left them in scattered chaos. They thought they were unified by their one language, by the common way they looked upon the world, but this legend holds that genuine unity results from obedience to the One Word, who speaks and brings light out of darkness, who blinks and life evolves from hippos to humans.

Should Scripture end here, we might just give up trying to communicate with anyone who speaks another language or lives in a different culture or practices another religion or practices our own religion, but much differently. Thankfully, Scripture does not end here. God taps Sarai and Abram on the shoulder and scatters them from their familiar surroundings, so: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” And much of the story that follows traces the conflict of a God whose vision is broad and inclusive and God’s people whose vision often stops at the border’s edge, whatever that border might be. Much of the story that follows is of the scattering Spirit of God versus a determined people who are quite happy to live in their silo-shaped babels.

On this Pentecost morning, the scattering Spirit of God reveals itself as also the unifying Spirit of God, inviting us to write a fresh ending to the ancient sentence that begins: “Come, let us.” Come, let us make sure that Blake knows she will be baptized into a community today that will love her and Robbie and their child about to be born. Come, let us build, not a tower into the heavens, but houses and apartments and transitional homes so all God’s children will have decent and affordable places to lay their heads at night. Come, let us see this table not as the dividing line between Catholics and Protestants,

but as the feeding station for all Christians who refuse to let even denominations divide them from the One who forgives and calls us to a scattered unity.

“Come, let us . . . “

Well, you don't need me to finish that sentence.

Finish it yourself!

AMEN