

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

The 6th Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021

Acts 10:34-4

“God’s Plan” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Acts 10:34–4 (*video*) (NRSV)

Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’

Watch God’s Big Plan PowerPoint video

The story of God’s Big Plan is based on Genesis 11:1-9. Some of you may have heard it called the story of the tower of Babel. I remember learning in Sunday school that the story is about God’s punishment for the pride and rebellion of the people that causes them to want to build a tower that can reach the heavens. Their desire is to make a name for themselves, rather than trusting that God was the one to make a name for them according to the promise to Abraham. In this understanding, God confounds their speech and scatters them to punish them. This is a common understanding, but it is only one interpretation of this story.

Another interpretation is a critique of the power of empire. This view focuses on the Babylonian empire that destroyed Judah and took the people into exile. The name of the city, “Babel” certainly leads to this interpretation. The name Babel is the same Hebrew word as “Babylon” in the rest of the Old Testament. The story highlights the way empires impose behaviors on the people, like insisting on a single dominant language. Alexander the Great was known for doing this in the Macedonian empire. His goal was to enforce a level of unity and conformity. From this understanding, the story of the tower of Babel is about the empire trying to force the people into being the same.

A third interpretation of Genesis 11 understands the people’s desire to remain in one place as contrary to God’s instruction that they “spread out and fill the whole earth in creation story of Genesis 1 and after the flood in Genesis 9. This interpretation sees that those who want to settle and build a city are scattered by God because God wants them to continue to move and even diversify. This interpretation is the one presented in God’s Big Plan and reflects current Biblical scholarship. It is based on a more accurate translation of the Hebrew language which leads to a better understanding of the author’s intent.

The Common English Bible has become one of my favorite translations because it reflects the advances in the study of the ancient Hebrew language of recent years. Listen to the story in this translation. “**11** All people on the earth had one language and the same words. ²When they traveled east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them hard.” They used bricks for stones and asphalt for mortar. ⁴They said, “Come, let’s build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and let’s make a name for ourselves so that we won’t be dispersed over all the earth.”

⁵Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the humans built. ⁶And the LORD said, “There is now one people and they all have one language. This is what they have begun to do, and now all that they plan to do will be possible for them. ⁷Come, let’s go down and mix up their language there so they won’t understand each other’s language.” ⁸Then the LORD dispersed them from there over all of the earth, and they stopped building the

city.⁹ Therefore, it is named Babel, because there the LORD mixed up the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD dispersed them over all the earth.

One of the ways we look for meaning in a Biblical text is to look carefully for things that stand out, for example repetition and variation of words. Verse one says, “all the earth had one language and the same words.” In verse 6, God echoes those words saying, “the people are one, and all of them have one language.” Nowhere does it say the problem is pride or the empire. Verse 2 gives another clue about what the issue was. In the Common English Bible it says, “they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.” The Hebrew verb *yasab* “to settle,” can also be translated as “to sit,” so the word emphasizes that the people have stopped moving. While God has been telling the people to go out and inhabit the earth, the people have decided to sit, to stay put, to do what feels comfortable but not what God desires. God sees them, God listens to them, and then God acts.

If the problem was the tower or the city, you would have thought God would have destroyed it. But the story doesn't suggest that their building project is the reason God acts. Nowhere does the story say that the reason they build is pride, that is an interpretation that has been placed on the text. Neither does it say that God desires to punish them. In fact, some Jewish scholars view God's response in the story as an example of God's personal involvement in what happens on the earth. “Come, let's go down and mix things up.” When we look more closely at the text, we find that this is a story of God showing the people what the world God intends looks like. As much as we like the idea of being with people just like us, God's plan is much bigger. God's plan is a world of diversity.ⁱ

If God desires the diversity of the world, why do we work so hard against God's will? We fight it even in our faith communities. We work for uniformity without diversity. Even our interpretation of the Genesis story has looked more like the human desire to be alike than to embrace the diversity God desires as something that is good. But our interpretations have consequences. For example, South African theologians' used the story of the tower of Babel to

justify apartheid, by arguing that God desired to keep separate languages and races apart from one another. ⁱⁱ

Religious leaders used the Bible to justify slavery in the United States. Yolanda Pierce, dean of Harvard University Divinity School explained, “So much of early American Christian identity is predicated on a proslavery theology. From the naming of the slave ships, to who sponsored some of these journeys including some churches, to the fact that so much of early American religious rhetoric is deeply intertwined . . . with slaveholding.” ⁱⁱⁱ

In today’s Scripture reading from the Book of Acts, Peter spoke to the Roman soldier, Cornelius and the people in Caesarea saying, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Peter’s speech is about more than inclusion and multiculturalism, but about the dissolution of boundaries that separate us at a many levels. He was speaking to Cornelius, who was not Jewish, but a Gentile, and he welcomed him to the way of Jesus without expecting him to follow Jewish customs.

Our study of God (theology) frames and directs our understanding of the Bible. If we assume God’s power, kindness, and love, it becomes harder to read stories like the Tower of Babel as about punishment. We know from the very beginning of the book of Genesis that God designed the world so that all people might flourish with our differences. Together the stories show us that the diversity of the world is not something to fight against, but rather celebrate. It is not something to try to dominate, as if one race or creed is superior to another’s, but rather to respect, for the world of diversity we have been given is a gift from our creator. A gift that God intended so that we might all flourish.

God’s Big Plan invites us to consider this, and so I want to leave you with a question from the authors to help you continue to think about the diversity of the world. “Why do you think God created a world with so many differences in it?”^{iv} Make a list of your thoughts, draw a picture of what you imagine. Take time to pause and consider the work of our creator.

ⁱ Caldwell, Elizabeth F., Hiebert, Theodore, God’s Big Plan, Flyaway Books, www.flyawaybooks.com.

ⁱⁱ Koenig, Sarah, Working Preacher, Luther Seminary, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries>, June 9, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zauzmer, Julie, **“The Bible was used to justify slavery. Then Africans made it their path to freedom”**, The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/April 30, 2019>.

^{iv} Caldwell, Elizabeth F., Hiebert, Theodore, God’s Big Plan, Flyaway Books, www.flyawaybooks.com.