

The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

12th June 2022

Matt Matthews

We have questions. We are naturally curious. Questions and curiosity are good things. How did God create the cosmos? What was before that? If God loves us, why do bad things happen to good people? How does prayer work? If God is all-powerful, how free is human free will? How is God one-in-three: father, son, holy spirit? Creator, redeemer, sustainer? Can God hear us all talking at once?

So many good questions.

But not all of the questions we have can be answered in completely satisfying ways. We are left often with wonder and awe, not with the cut-and-dried answers we seek. Job wanted answers, but God's answer to Job was another question. Jesus often answered questions with stories. It is apparent we'll never fully understand God and the questions we have about God. God is so much bigger and beyond us, and yet with us—above us and yet here.

God is mystery. We don't always handle mystery well.

* * *

Here in our passage from Genesis we have our ancestors' answer to this question: If we were created from one mother and one father, Adam and the beautiful Eve, why and how is it that the peoples of the world became so scattered, so various in tastes, so talkative in such different languages? Why do our mothers have such different recipes in their cookbooks?

The "answer" is the story of the Tower of Babel.

People started building a high tower all the way to heaven. If they got there, they'd see all of God's tricks. People would harness all of their own power, and they wouldn't need God's power any more.

So, the story goes, God scrambled their languages and scattered the people. They'd no longer have the wherewithal to challenge God's power. That tower became known as "Babel" because when everyone tried to talk with one another, that's all they heard.

This is really a story about arrogance, isn't it? When people think they have all the answers, God must shake God's head. When we try to rely only on ourselves, God must throw up God's hands.

God made us for relationship with God and with each other. And arrogance tricks us into believing we don't need each other. I can do it all on my own. I don't need a team. I am independent and strong. I am a rock. I am an island. I have all the answers. *And I certainly don't need God.*

So much for the relationship God intends.

Questions are good. Questions lead us to conversation. Curiosity always leads us to discovery. And what we often discover as we seek answers are the deeper, more profound questions. We trust God not because we fully understand God. We trust God because God is God. We trust God precisely because God is bigger than our brains. This trust leads to love, which leads to service, which leads always to awe and wonder and thanks.

Questions are good. But the arrogance of thinking we know it all is bad. The arrogance of thinking we can go it alone is bad. The arrogance of believing that we don't need God is bad. When our "answers" wall us off from each other and from God, we've gotten too big for our britches, as my Mom used to say. We lost sight of our place, of each other, and of what is holy and divine and true. God wants to scatter and make low that kind of self-centered, pompous, idolatrous attitude.

* * *

But the questions we have about God are good. And we should keep exploring and asking and wondering.

I leave you with Marc Gellman's retelling of the story of Babel. Gellman's version is the story of Arinna, a smart, curious girl who loved God a lot and wanted to know a lot more about God. Particularly she wanted to know if God had a big toe.

Arinna asked her mom, "Mom you have a big toe. Dad has big toe. Does God have a big toe?"

Arinna's mom told her to ask her dad. She did. Her dad told her to ask her grandfather. Arinna did. Everybody has a big toe, Arinna pronounced, but does God have a big toe?

Grandfather asked the king if God had a big toe, and the king ordered the people to build a tower. The king would stand on the top of the big tower, look into heaven, and see if God had a big toe. Everyone chipped in. The tower grew higher and higher.

God wasn't pleased. God knew if everybody worked on the tower, nobody would work in the fields growing things. Nobody would be in the shops making things. If they used all the bricks for the tower, they'd have no bricks for homes.

God knew the tower had to go, so God confused the language of the people. Soon, people divided up with others who spoke their own language and they left town to form other villages and towns where people spoke the same language.

On the way out of town, Arinna sat in a cart with her parents and grandfather. "Momma," she asked, "I have a belly button. You have a belly button. Daddy has a belly button."

"Does God have a belly button, too?"

* * *

To the God who invites our questions be all honor and glory, AMEN.

* * *

Does God Have A Big Toe? Stories About Stories In The Bible, by Marc Gellman, Harper/Trophy, New York: 1989.