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Lost in Translation | *Building Project*

Genesis 11:1-9

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When I was a kid, I loved to play with Legos. Back in those days we didn't have sets, elaborate sets to build structures like Hogwarts or the Millennium Falcon. We basically had blocks, and your creativity was not driven by a premade set but by your own imagination. My brother and I would spend hours building all kinds of structures. As the years went on new Lego ideas would come as wheels were added to the Lego box. Wheels... wow, now we could make cars that would roll and of course crash into each other. Awesome! However, as I got older, I realized that I could build other things, things that were not made out of Legos. I could build things like a beautiful spinning football, or I could build the ability to throw a curveball. I could build a reputation for being good at athletics. I could build a work ethic and be rewarded for a job well done. And then I realized that I could build relationships, good friendships and then one day build a relationship that would last the rest of my life with my wife and then my kiddos. And your story, maybe it didn't start off with Legos, but is probably very similar as we all have built our lives.

But along the way we also have found out that we can build other structures. Structures that bring hurt and pain into our world. We can build barriers that limit others. We can build systems that create systemic poverty. We can build processes that put our entire planet under immense stress. We can build technologies that benefit the few at the expense of many.

Our scripture today challenges us to ask the question "What are we building?" However, like a lot of the origin stories that we read about in Genesis, some of it has been lost in translation. Let's review our Genesis story so far. We are created in the image of God, we are the coin with the image of God stamped on us, and to bear that image in the world we are Creators, guided by the Holy Spirit so that we when speak we speak a Word of light into the darkness. And in bearing the image

of God we are called to know when to say enough, to know that the creative process includes rest.

We are a people who know the difference between good and evil, that we are not beasts, but the beast is crouching at the door, the beast desires to take over but in living the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness leads us to self-control that helps us master the beast. It's impossible to hate when you are practicing love.

And then last week Pastor Sarah unpacked for us the story of the flood where at the very center, the very heart of the story is that God remembers God's people. God doesn't leave them floating out in a boat, but God remembers and then promises to hang up the bow of destruction, actually pointing the business end of the bow away from the earth. I invite you to check out this week's podcast as we talk a lot more about that and how significant that promise to remember impacts the story over and over and over again.

And today we move to another part of the origin story. The story we call the Tower of Babel. And we typically think that is story is describing how so many different languages came to be spoken on earth or that God was worried about the consolidation of power and what human beings would do with that power.

⁶ And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. (Gen 11:6 NRS)

So what power is God worried about? In the text we just read Genesis 11:1-9 it's hard to figure that out. I must be something bad right? But let's not guess. Let's have the text lead us. Right before Genesis 11 we have the seemingly boring Genesis 10. It's filled with a genealogy and unless you are one of those people who get jacked up about genealogies you probably will skip it. Even if you are into genealogies, this Genesis 10 is really weird and doesn't seem to say much.

However, genealogies in the bible hold critical information. We just need to know how to read them. A couple of things. Genealogies usually mark the end of one period and mark the beginning of something new. God is about to do something new right after a genealogy. In between the Cain and Noah stories. Here between the Noah and Babel stories. Then between The Babel story and the call of Abraham. The Gospel of Matthew also leads with a genealogy.

Also, if you spend the time to read the genealogies pay attention to when one particular person is highlighted and described or if a woman is mentioned. That is a big deal and that is coming up soon. So, let's focus on today and the genealogy that precedes the Tower of Babel story and what is so concerning to God.

⁶ *The descendants of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan.* ⁷ *The descendants of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.* ⁸ *Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior.* ⁹ *He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD."* ¹⁰ *The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar.* ¹¹ *From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and* ¹² *Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. (Gen 10:6-12 NRS)*

Now a couple of things. I know you've been waiting all your life for a pastor to say the word "nimrod" in church. That word over the centuries has become, not a swear word, but a word that negatively describes someone. But here in our scripture Nimrod is a name for a mighty warrior. Again, lost in translation, the English doesn't help. The phrase *He was a mighty hunter before the LORD* is not a term of endearment as if someone is standing righteous before God. Nimrod is doing quite the opposite. Nimrod is a killer of humans. Nimrod is so good at killing other human beings that he is said to be the first human on earth who was the best and most prolific at killing humans. Nimrod stands in opposition before and against

God. Nimrod is a challenger. Nimrod is a major problem for God's purposes for humanity.

And Nimrod has a piece of technology that no one else has. ³ *And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. (Gen 11:3 NRS)*

It may not seem like much, and you and I can easily overlook this but for that time in human history, to have the technology of brick and mortar is like having Humvee while others are still traveling by covered wagon. You could build bigger and stronger cities. Bigger and stronger walls for protection. You could build higher more stable towers so you would be able to have more warning if enemies approached. Your cities would burn as easily and you could build bigger and taller monuments, taller towers to the gods for worship that represented strength and power. And in our scripture, with what we call the tower of babel, a tower in honor of themselves. A tower of self-worship.

And here is Nimrod, who is better at killing other humans than anyone else on earth, who is using the latest technology to make stronger more powerful cities than anyone else – cities as tools of consolidating power, and at the same time making towers of self-worship. Nimrod who stands in opposition to God and God's purposes, is on mission to dominate, destroy and kill all in his name.

Let's pause a bit here. You would think, in the story, this would have been a better time– if there is such a thing – for a flood to come and cleanse the world of violence, destruction and self-worship but God made a promise. The business end of the bow is pointing up away from the earth. So, God does something else.

⁸ *So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.* ⁹ *Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered*

*them abroad over the face of all the earth.
(Gen 11:8-9 NRS)*

And this is where some things get lost in translation. God is not upset with the brick-and-mortar city building. You can even image God being quite proud of humanities advancement in technology. Technology is not the problem; it's how human beings decide how to use it. And when you have a Nimrod out there, whose only purpose, who has so demonstrated that purpose that he has made a name for himself as the best at what he does, which is killing and destroying, takes hold of that technology and uses it to "deify" himself instead of using that technology to protect and help others, which would be God's purposes, God acts.

The Apostle Paul puts it in perspective for us in this letter to the Philippians.

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phi 4:13 NRS)

If Nimrod would have had this perspective, things might have been different. I can do all things through God... who strengthens me. It's very different when Nimrod says, "I can do all things through my own ego, and I find my strength in the destruction of others."

So here is the obvious observation and question for us. Throughout history there have been many, many Nimrods who seek power through ego or destruction. And it's easy to point them out. But the question for us is, when do we act like a Nimrod? When and where in our life are we consolidating power through our own ego? When do our own actions bring pain and hurt? When have we used a new technology to build monuments to ourselves? Or are we seeking to build monuments with our lives in service of God who gives us strength?

Your life, like a box of Legos – what are you building?