

Third Sunday after Pentecost (July 3, 2011)

**Beginning: Telling Stories from Genesis**

**“A Center That Will Not Hold”**

Text: [Genesis 11:1-9](#)

by the [Rev. Bernard H. Lieving Jr.](#)

Our son has been doing some creative writing and entering short story contests. One such contest required a story of less than 150 words. While this morning's text is a tad longer than that, it fits the classic definition of a "short story" I learned way back in my college English creative writing classes. It has an abrupt beginning; it recounts one incident with a single plot and setting; it has few characters and covers a short period of time; there is a crisis and a turning point, and may or may not have a moral, spiritual, or practical truth. A short story may be based on fact or it may not. And, a good short story usually connects with our own story in some fashion.

This story may have been first told by an old grandfather sitting with his grandchildren as he gave them his view of the world. That's very different from what Dorothy and I did in Pennsylvania last week with our seven-year-old grandson Luke. One day he and I went through 80 tokens at Chuck E. Cheese's (we went somewhere else for lunch) and then the next day we saw the first showing of "Cars 2."

This morning's storyteller had witnessed the Babylonian rout of the people of Israel; the destruction of Jerusalem including the temple, and he had been one of those forced to walk hundreds of miles into exile in Babylon. Scholars are not sure of the story's context and may or may not be a reflection on a specific event. Unlike the flood story of last week's emphasis when many cultures each had their own flood story; no other story like this one has been found in the ancient Near East.

Let's look at this morning's story and see if it fits the criterion of a short story. It certainly has an abrupt, surprise beginning: **“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”** What makes it so abrupt is that the whole of 10<sup>th</sup> chapter went to great lengths to create Noah's post-flood family tree and each section of that tree had their own lands and languages in fulfillment of God's command at creation: **“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”**

Maybe it would help us deal with what seems to be a contradiction if we do not place the two chapters in chronological order but rather see the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter as simply another perspective on the 10<sup>th</sup>. I've heard sermons that said the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter explains the origin of language diversity. If so, what do we do with the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter? I'm not going to answer that question today; that's for a discussion time.

The second through the fourth verses provide the setting, the plot, and a partial list of the characters: **“And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its tops in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’”**

We do not know who the “they” are in the story. Whoever “they” are, according to the storyteller, have a common language and vocabulary. They settle in Babylon. They

decide to build a city using brick and tar as their building materials. They also decide to build a tower either as a fortress or a temple tower, like a Near Eastern ziggurat.

Then they decide to fly in the face of God's mandate to fill the earth; to be scattered abroad. The rich diversity of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, of descendants and relatives and families, is going to be changed into uniformity. Everyone was going to be the same with no variety, no differences, and, no fun.

I said earlier that these verses had only a partial list of the story's characters. Here there is no word about God. It's all about whoever "they" are; their desires, their ambitions, their pride and their arrogance. "The implication here is that the people are depending on themselves to define who they are, and what they are about in the world. This stands in stark contrast to God's promise to Abraham in the following chapter: "I will ... make your name great." [Click here for more information.](#)

Enter God, the crisis and the turning point in verse 5: **"The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had build. And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will not be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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."**

God comes down to hold a judicial inquiry and determined that the building project was only the beginning; if they were successful here, humankind had limitless possibilities to thwart the will of the Creator. The unity which they sought, a unity that seeks self-preservation at all costs, had to be resisted by God and so the judgment is to confound their language and scatter them. By their actions they alienated themselves from God and thus sin reenters the world following the flood.

So what is the truth in this story and how might this story connect to our own? The clear warning of this text is the danger of constructing human existence around a center that will not hold, a center that is comprised of only human ambition and effort without God. Even at their best, human beings cannot comprise a center strong enough to sustain themselves apart from God. Perhaps you have heard it said or even said it yourself when there has been a crisis, a tragedy and someone says, "I don't know how anyone gets through such times without a faith in God." And at their worst, human beings have the capability to bring unspeakable pain and horror into the world. Just pick up your morning paper or listen to the evening news to discover the terrible things that we humans inflict on one another.

This story connects with our story when we as individuals and collectively as a church accept and appreciate differences and see each other's existence and the world around us as enrichment and not as a threat.

One of the values of this church which I celebrate is that we can in our diversity, talk to each other, tell each other our stories, listen to each other and learn from each other. We can ask questions and even argue with one another and when we move out into the world,

whether on mission trips to Cuba, South Africa, Nicaragua, or just being who we are here in Tampa, we work to build communities of trust and equal relationships in the name of Christ. We focus on being centered in Christ as revealed in scripture and that is a center that will hold.

And on this Fourth of July weekend, this text is a message for our nation and our leaders. We are a nation and a world of diversity, and attempts to get everyone to look alike, speak only one language, worship all the same and act alike are only false unity, centered often in our own self-interests. Not everyone in the world needs our culture, our mores, our form of government or our values and traditions, as good as they might be. No one nation can solve all the world's problems nor deal with all the world's issues. No one has to dominate anyone else. God created us equal and the richness of our equality lies in our diversity.

This is a great short story with infinite, eternal truth for each of us and all of us. And on this Sunday as we come to the Table we celebrate unity in our diversity in the words, "Because there is one loaf, we, though we be many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break, it is a means of sharing in the body of Christ!"

(I am indebted to Pastor Christina Erb-Kanzleiter of Peace United Methodist Church, Munich, Germany for her insights into this passage in her sermon, "Tower of Babel," found at [http://www.peacechurch.de/Genesis\\_11\\_Tower\\_of\\_Babel.pdf](http://www.peacechurch.de/Genesis_11_Tower_of_Babel.pdf))