Pentecost—C

Genesis 11:1-9

Lessons to Learn From the Tower Of Babel

America has always liked building monuments to honor its famous citizens and to remember great things in its history. For example, in New York City Harbor there stands a gigantic monument to American freedom. We call it the Statue of Liberty. In our nation’s capitol, you will find a monument reaching up to the heavens to honor the father of our country, George Washington. On the bank of the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri, stands the majestic Gateway Arch which symbolizes America’s westward expansion. Our American cities also have their monuments to progress and civilization. We call them skyscrapers. In New York, it’s the Empire State Building. In Chicago, it’s the Sears Tower. In Minneapolis, it’s the IDS Building. Monuments and skyscrapers can be found all across our land. This morning the Holy Spirit is going to take us back in time so that we can watch the building of this world’s first skyscraper. It was called the Tower of Babel. Not only was the Tower of Babel this world’s first skyscraper, it was also this world’s first monument. Yet this skyscraper was not a monument to freedom or westward expansion or to some famous human being. No, the Tower of Babel is a monument to sin. There are many lessons that we can learn from this first monument/skyscraper. Today as you and I spend our time together in the Word, let’s learn some lessons from the tower of Babel.

I. A warning about the sin of pride

In the chapter before this lesson begins, the Holy Spirit guided Moses’ pen to write down what had happened after the Lord sent a worldwide flood to destroy all but eight members of the human race. Noah’s family left the ark, and the Lord blessed Noah’s three sons and their wives with many children. Those children lived long lives and they in turn were blessed with many children of their own. That’s how the Lord once again repopulated the earth. Our lesson begins about 200 years after the Great Flood. The entire population of the world had decided to settle in the very fertile area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers called the plain of Shinar. God’s Word also tells us about another gift with which the Lord had blessed the whole world. It says: “Now the world had one common language and a common speech.” People speak in over 5,000 different languages in our world today. After the flood there was only one language and everybody in the world spoke it. What an amazing thing. No dialects, no mid-western accents, no southern drawls, no foreign sounds. The Hebrew words literally mean: “Everyone had their lips shaped the same way when they spoke words, and everyone used the same vocabulary.”

But what did these people do with this special blessing from their Maker? “They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar.’” The people were going to start a building project, and instead of the old stand-bys of sun-dried clay or stone with mud for mortar, they would now use much more lasting building materials such as fire-hardened brick and tar mortar. At first glance there doesn’t appear to be anything wrong with that, that is, until we see the motive behind it all. Our reading goes on to say: “Then they said, ‘Come, let’s build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth.’” How did these people use this special blessing from their Maker of one language? They didn’t use it at all. They abused it. The Lord had intended this blessing to unite people in faith and to enable them to instruct, encourage, and strengthen one another in his ways. They used it to unite
themselves against him. With one voice they defied and rebelled against the Lord’s will for their lives. The Lord had told Noah and his sons: “Fill the earth.” He told them that so that from the East to the West, from the North to the South people would live for him and his name would be glorified in every corner of the world. But these people had no intention of doing that because they wanted to dethrone God and take his place. They would spare no expense or effort to glorify themselves and their achievements. They would be the masters of their lives using their brawn and their brainpower to provide themselves happiness. No need for an Almighty Preserver and a gracious Savior from sin. He is left out of their plans for life. “Glory to man in the highest!” That’s what the Tower of Babel symbolizes. That is the sin of pride.

Maybe these folks thought their sin was going to go unnoticed by the Lord or maybe they thought he didn’t have the power to do anything about it, but at the top of that tower the Lord was waiting and watching. He put an end to this godless undertaking. We are permitted to listen in to a council meeting of the Holy Trinity. The Triune God says: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other.” We all know what happened next. One day everyone is communicating and working together. The next day it’s total chaos. All of a sudden the electrician says something to the carpenter and the carpenter doesn’t have the slightest idea what the electrician is talking about. The plumber talks to the bricklayer, and the bricklayer scratches his head and shouts: “What did you say?” The foreman is barking out orders to the laborers and they are shrugging their shoulders in bewilderment. The ladies get together for morning coffee and no one has a clue about what the other one is saying. Nothing good happens when people cannot communicate. This is true from the standpoint of a nation divided as well as in marriage and family. The people no longer could work together. Worse yet, they no longer trusted one another. The spirit of friendliness and confidence was replaced by ugly suspicion. People today still have mistrust for people who do not speak the same language. Finally in frustration, the people throw up their hands, put down their tools, pack their bags, and in little family groups head out in different directions. Our lesson tells us they are now forced to carry out the Lord’s wishes: “So the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” The Bible says: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked” (Galatians 6:7). Here is a story that put an exclamation point behind the Scriptural truth.

Remember I said that there are more than 5,000 different languages today. Some 21st century sociologist might say that shows human progress and human wisdom. This story says otherwise. The Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues which took place there is no monument to human progress or human wisdom. It’s a monument to human sin. What happened at the Tower of Babel laid the foundation for even greater world troubles. Brotherliness disappeared and was replaced with the kind of selfishness, suspicion, and rivalry that exists in our world up to this very day. Why is nation pitted against nation, society against society, and individual against individual? We have an answer here. Why this proud and God-defiant attitude in our country today, a proud and God-defiant attitude that demands the right to free sexual expression, the right to abortion, the right to divorce, the right to euthanasia, the right to rebel against authority, the right to live perverted lifestyles, and the right to express these corrupt values openly and unhindered? We have an answer here at a story when the Lord is left out and the song is: “Glory to man in the highest!”

But now we’ve got to bring this story much, much closer to home. Are there some monuments to sin that we’ve been building in our lives? Are there some things right now that
we’ve allowed into our lives that are dishonoring and defying the Lord? A sinful relationship outside of marriage which we refuse to give up, a chip on our shoulder that won’t let us honor and obey our parents the way we should, hurt feelings that just won’t permit us to forgive someone we think has snubbed us or taken credit for something we did, or some feelings of anger, bitterness, and jealousy which we just can’t put away toward that person who is more successful than we are? Do we ever try to make a name for ourselves? Is there ever a song in our lives that says: “Glory to man the highest!”—pride in our abilities and accomplishments, or great pride in our families at the expense of looking down at others, or maybe even a pride that pats ourselves on the back for our active church life as we compare ourselves to others in this congregation? Are we building any Towers of Babel in which the Lord isn’t included in the blueprints?

I read a story about a pastor who was invited to dinner in the home of a very wealthy Texan. After the meal was over the host took the pastor to the place where they could get a good view of the surrounding area. Pointing to the oil wells punctuating the landscape, the Texan boasted: “Twenty-five years ago I had nothing. Now as far as you can see, it’s all mine.” Looking to the north at his sprawling grain fields, this Texan said: “That’s all mine.” Turning toward the east were herds of cattle about which he bragged: “They are all mine.” Then pointing to the west and a beautiful forest, he exclaimed, “That’s all mine, too.” The man paused, expecting the pastor to compliment him on his great success. Instead the pastor placed one hand on the man’s shoulder and pointing heavenward with the other, he said: “How much do you have in that direction?” How much do you have in that direction? Does that question also apply to you and to me? When we put the Towers up, whatever they might be, faith in the Lord cannot thrive and grow. That is what the sin of pride can do to anyone of us. The Lord is absolutely unwilling to let anyone wipe their feet on his commandments or on his wishes. The Bible says: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked” (Galatians 6:7). “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18)—that every person here today would never forget that lesson from the Tower of Babel.

II. A reminder about God’s grace

But there is one more lesson in this story. It is not as easy to spot as the warning; nevertheless, it is here. The second lesson from the Tower of Babel is a beautiful reminder of God’s amazing grace.

After this historical event here in our reading, what would the Lord’s relationship be to this disorderly and rebellious human race? Would his patience finally be exhausted? If people wanted to run away from him would he finally say: “All right! It you want to go to hell so badly, have it your way! See if I care!” No, the Lord didn’t destroy these sinners who wanted to dethrone him, defy him, and make a name for themselves. In his mercy the Lord scattered them. He confused their speech to bring them to repentance. He strikes them with confusion so that they will still be savable. Our Lord’s actions are just another chapter in his merciful plan to save sinners from the fires of hell. In the very next chapter he gives the promise of a Savior for mankind to Abraham and he repeated that promise again and again and again until on Pentecost, disciples in 61 different languages proclaimed how this Savior had come. Where Babel brought about great disunity through multiplicity of languages, Pentecost produced unity among a people of different languages by speeding the common message and language of salvation through Jesus Christ throughout the world. God’s only Son, Jesus Christ, had died on a cross for the sins of the whole world. God’s Son, Jesus Christ, had risen from the dead three days later forgiving sin, beating Satan, and
conquering death. God’s Son, Jesus Christ, returned in glory to heaven where one day all Christians will live and reign with him for all eternity.

Above all those monuments of sin that we have built in our lives, there is a tower that reaches up to and into heaven for us. It was built and finished by our Savior, Jesus Christ, upon the rock foundation of his holy life and his innocent suffering and death. “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time.” Life at its best is lived only when that life centers on Jesus and his cross. “In the cross of Christ I glory towering over the wrecks of time.” It’s so much easier to trust in what our eyes can see in this life, but the Lord Jesus asks us to look to him for security. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). “When the woes of life o’ertake me, hope deceives and fears annoy, never shall the cross forsake me; Lo, it glows with peace and joy.”

“In the cross of Christ I glory towering o’er the wrecks of time.” So often we think true greatness lies in achieving earthly fame, but it really lies with those who choose to live lives that humbly serve Jesus’ name. How many times don’t we try to handle life alone? How often don’t we make plans that leave the Lord out? What a mess it always turns out to be. Not our plans, not our abilities, not our accomplishments—the Bible says: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (2 Corinthians 10:17). His never-ending forgiveness for all our failures, his everlasting love that never fails us or lets us down, his strength that overcomes all our weaknesses, his guidance which carries us through all our days—not the Tower of Babel, but in the cross of Christ you and I glory.

By trusting in Jesus and that cross one day we shall reach heaven when once again with one voice and in one language we will join the people of all races and nations in singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13). Amen.