



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina

9 June 2019

Sermon: Babel

Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

There are twice as many people on the face of this earth today than there were 50 years ago. Who here is 50 years or older, don't be shy? Yes, we're inside as our area got some much needed rain this week, but not to worry, we're keeping it interactive today. So, to you who are 14 years or more my senior, I wonder, have things felt a bit more crowded around here lately? What other changes about our environment have you seen in the last few decades? **(Congregation shares responses aloud)**. Population growth is not all bad, of course. I, for one, am happy to be alive at this moment! But when you look at the charts, it's clear we are not taking the measures we need in order to care of this earth as the population increases. There's a striking correlation: As the number of humans increases, the number of all other living things on the planet decreases.¹

¹ See Elizabeth Kolbert, "Climate Change and the New Age of Extinction," *The New Yorker*. May 13, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/climate-change-and-the-new-age-of-extinction>

As Marcia pointed out in her sermon a couple of weeks ago, our planet is facing what scientists are calling the 6th mass extinction.² The last one, the 5th, was the comet that took out the dinosaurs. Species are going extinct right now faster than they ever have before in human history. In the next few decades, a million species might be wiped out forever on our earth. And the cause is multi-faceted, but it's all human led: deforestation, overfishing, poaching of endangered species, the rapid rise in cities, and of course, climate change from the overabundance of carbon in our atmosphere.

It is a new tower of Babel: humankind, banding together, in the name of progress, and the related fear of being left behind, works feverishly on a singular project: development, not to be good stewards of the earth but rather to profit from it no matter the consequences. Remember, the workers in Babel were afraid:

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” It was a unity forged in fear. Fearing scattering and diversity, it was an impulse to build, build, build, whatever the cost. Progress for its own sake, forsaking God’s commandment to be fruitful, multiply, and spread across creation

² Marcia Mount Shoop, “Do You Want to be Well?” Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. May 26, 2019. <https://www.gcpcusa.org/sermons/do-you-want-to-be-well/>. See also Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2014).

and care for it. We are in Babel again today. Building, and building, and building again, abandoning the human vocation to be good stewards of creation.³

I take part in that project. We all do. But there's also another, more-subtle tower being erected alongside, or within, our environmental peril. Bill Waterson's "Calvin and Hobbes," the great newspaper cartoon series about a young boy and his companion tiger that ran through the 80s and 90s, has a strip series that encapsulates it.⁴ Calvin and Hobbes come across a place that was once a beautiful forest, now destroyed to make room for condominiums. "What happened to these trees here? Who cleared out the woods? There used to be lots of animals in these woods! Now it's a mud pit!" laments Calvin. Hobbes, the tiger, attempts unsuccessfully to exact revenge. He tries to level the suburbs by commandeering an empty bulldozer, but that plan is thwarted when they can't find the keys. So, Calvin finishes, in the last panels of the strip, with despair. Showing his characteristic wisdom, Calvin says to Hobbes, "Eventually there won't be a nice spot left anywhere. I wonder if you can refuse to inherit the world." And Hobbes retorts, "I think if you're born, it's too late."

³ I am thankful to Leanne Van Dyk's helpful commentary on this passage in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 320-322.

⁴ Bill Waterson, "Calvin and Hobbes," March 18-21, 1987. See <https://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1987/03/19>

The other tower we build, that you and I build, is our collective despair, and its attendant apathy. Because it's all so much, isn't it? A sixth great extinction, led by corporations and governments, including our own, that seem just not to care, to have no conscience when it comes to the earth we are leaving our children and grandchildren. When the dire warnings of scientists and the voices of those who want change in how we treat our earth are all just shouts into a void of greed, progress, and profit, I feel this temptation to throw my hands up in the air, to give up. Well, what can you do? What can I do? It feels like we have already lost.

I believe this frustration is something we share. Let's take some time to talk about some of these impasses. What frustrates you the most about the current situation with our planet? Please, take some time to turn to our neighbors, next to you in the pews. Again, what frustrates you the most about the current situation with our planet? **(Congregation shares responses aloud).**

I appreciate this lament. Frankly, it is appropriate on an Earth Sunday.

I was a teenager when I attended my first statewide denominational gathering. This was a different denomination than the PC(USA). It was and is, on the whole, a more conservative, evangelical denomination, though the particular church I belonged to and represented at the time was not. Again, I was a teenager, accompanying my youth minister at this state convention. And I remember vividly the opening worship service. It was unlike anything I had seen before. Keep in

mind, everyone who attended that worship service was a church leader in some form. So, I found it strange, that the worship itself contained alter call after alter call, asking the congregation to repent of our sins and to accept Jesus Christ in our hearts as lord and savior. Toward the end of the sermon, I turned to my youth minister sitting next to me, asking, “Hey, isn’t most everyone here a pastor? Haven’t we done this already?” And my youth minister, who had his own issues with the direction of the denomination, said, with some sarcasm, “Richie (I used to go by Richie back then), Richie, this is all they know how to do.”

Pentecost is not an undoing of the gift of diversity and our diverse vocations created by God as illustrated in the story of the tower of Babel. Notice in the book of Acts, when the Spirit fell on the crowd, the diverse group of onlookers heard the Gospel, but “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” The good news did not flatten and homogenize everyone, or every culture, to be the same always. Rather, the Holy Spirit’s message of God’s love and will came to each person through translation, taking shape within and impacted by the particulars of each culture and language. Likewise, Pentecost is not a call for us all to be the same always, but rather is it a celebration of our abundant particularity,

our beautiful diversity, as God calls to each of us in the way and the language we can understand.⁵

This is true of God's command to care for this earth. If the urgency we all hear is simply an overwhelming demand, "Save the earth," we will surely fall into despair. But listen to the Spirit; it calls each of us, in a new and different voice, depending on where we are and who we are. God's call is complex and contextual. The Spirit asks of each of us: What can you do? Now? A year from now? At home, at work? It asks Grace Covenant, what can we do? This community has answered this question already in a number of ways: this congregation is officially recognized as an Earth Care congregation and a wildlife habitat – that is amazing. We answer in other ways too: the abundance of produce growing in our garden right now and our newly planted butterfly garden, not to mention that we will be installing solar panels on this very roof in the near future. These measures are not an end, but are instead a good start. Let us finish this time together again in discussion. Where do you hear the Spirit calling Grace Covenant in the months and years going forward? What is one way this community can be better stewards of the earth? Let's brainstorm together. Please, turn to your pew partners again.

(Congregation shares responses aloud).

⁵ I am thankful to Stephanie M. Crumpton's helpful commentary on this passage in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 2.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 329-330.

Remember that God is already speaking to us. Right now, the Spirit is here, in this place, in this community, and within you and me. That Spirit enlivens this community, just as it did in the Pentecost fires of the early church. In fact, the same Spirit stretches us, empowers and emboldens us to do things that might otherwise seem improbable or impossible. Rather than sinking into despair, let us then keep our ears open, seeking the voice of the Spirit that blows where it will, as it renews us, and frees us, and challenges us, and sets us all ablaze with the very light of God. Amen.

Charge

Our charge is this: to remember the earth, not from a place of despair but one of hope, for the Spirit calls to us, even now. Let us follow its voice, wherever it takes us.