

Sermon for May 15, 2016 - Pentecost

Genesis 11:1-9 NIV84

Theme: What Do You Want to Build?

- 1) People want to build monuments to themselves. (vv. 1–4)
- 2) God wants to build his church. (vv. 5–9)

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us 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 whole earth." ⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." ⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ 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.

What do you think about Financial Investment commercials - you know, the kind that show smiling people living their dreams, all because they worked hard and invested wisely? Do you find them appealing - encouraging you to think about your own goals and what you can do to attain them?

The life goals people set for themselves usually have to do with either how they can live comfortably, securely and well; or how they can make a name for themselves by leaving their mark on the world. While it is not necessarily wrong to have such goals, we have to be careful with them. Why? Because God has other goals and priorities that he wants us to pursue. He wants our lives to glorify him and not ourselves. He wants us to find our comfort, security and well being in our relationship with him, and not in the things of this earth.

The Christian life is not about what we can attain for ourselves. Rather, it's about Christ's kingdom and the role God has graciously given us in it. Let us consider these things, under the theme: **What Do You Want to Build?** *1) People want to build monuments to themselves. 2) God wants to build his Church.*

Part One: People want to build monuments to themselves.

Our text takes place about a hundred or two years after the Flood. Do you remember why God sent that great disaster? It was because the people of the world had grown wicked. They refused to believe and obey the LORD. Worst of all, they refused to repent and be forgiven.

After the flood, believing Noah and his family were the only humans left on the earth. Over the years they grew in number. It was now time for them to “fill the earth” as God had commanded Noah (cf. Genesis 1:28, 9:1), and this is where our text breaks in:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. And why was that? Because they all came from one family.

As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

A few hundred miles - that’s as far as the human race got from Mount Ararat, where the ark had settled. They found themselves in a beautiful, fertile plain between two rivers. As they looked around, they thought they had all they needed: fresh water, good soil and favorable weather. “Why move from here?” And so, instead of pitching tents, they planned to do something else:

³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." . . . "Come, let us 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 whole earth."

No temporary mud houses for these folks. They wanted to stay in Shinar forever. “Who cares that the LORD commanded them to inhabit the whole earth.” they thought, “He’s just keeping us from enjoying life.” They didn’t need the LORD. They had themselves. They would build a fortified city. Within its walls they would be safe. They would build a tower reaching into the heavens - showing how great they were. Future generations would thank them - maybe even consider them gods for what they accomplished.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: take a moment to reflect on the goals of these people. Their desire for earthly sustenance, security and status drove their actions more than the LORD’s loving command. Just like Adam and Eve, they wanted to be like god and control their own destiny. Instead of trusting the LORD, they thought that He was trying to prevent their happiness. Their desire for the things of this world moved them to rebel.

Is it any different today? People are still driven by their earthly passions. The desire to live comfortably, securely and well still directs all worldly decision making - even if those decisions go against God’s clear Word. “Glory to man in the highest!” - this was humanity’s song on the plains of Shinar; and it still is man’s mantra today.

And we, dear Christians, are not immune to this thinking either. All of us have a corrupt, sinful nature that seeks to fulfill its own will instead of God’s. Think about it for a moment: why do we do the things we do? For example, why do we invest money for our retirement? Do we do it to the glory of God: so we will have money to live on and support the Gospel in the future, or do we invest merely so that we can live comfortably? Why do we work so hard? Is it because we are concerned about the spread of God’s kingdom, or merely to get more toys for ourselves? What do you want to build? An earthly life and name for yourself that will perish? That’s not God’s desire for you. He wants you to enjoy the eternal pleasures of living with him forever in His kingdom. To this end He is always working - even when He allows bad things to come into your life. This point is clearly made by what happens next in our text.

Part Two: God wants to build his church.

The human race was busy on the plains of Shinar: working together in harmony to build a wonderful city. Seeing this would have been a beautiful sight, if it weren't for the fact that mankind was united against the LORD. What would happen if they succeeded? Things would be as bad as they were before the flood.

This is why, when the LORD saw *the city and the tower that the men were building*.⁶ *The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. That is to say: left unchecked, humanity will continue to plan and do great evils against the LORD. Left unchecked, humanity will even ruin God's promise of the Savior!*

The LORD truly disliked what he saw happening on the plains of Shinar. Humanity had to be stopped, and yet the LORD didn't want to destroy them. He wanted to save them. This is why, instead of wiping those rebels out, our loving, triune God said: *"Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."*

Without a common language, people would not be able to communicate their ideas with one another. More than that, their sinful natures would kick in and start to view others with suspicion. They would no longer unite against God. Frustration and fear would drive them to the ends of the earth - to the very places God intended them to go until His promised Savior would be revealed.

And as the LORD willed it, so it happened: *the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city*.⁹ *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.*

Luther once commented that what happened at Babel was a more severe judgment on mankind than the Flood. The Flood only affected one generation, but what happened at Babel has affected every generation since. Racial suspicion, fear, bigotry and hostility all have their roots in this one event. How many wars and other evils haven't resulted from this? Be that as it may, the LORD's judgement at Babel was also an act of underserved love. It saved humanity from itself. No matter how much mankind unites against God, the LORD will not allow humanity to prevent him from doing what He promised: sending Jesus to die for the sins of the world so that, whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. To this end God is always working.

And this brings us to Pentecost. God had kept his promise to send a Savior. Jesus accomplished our salvation through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection. Before He ascended into heaven, he promised to give the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit so that they could go into the world to preach the good news of Christ's salvation.

On Pentecost, God fulfilled that promise. Not only did he send his Spirit, he also gave his disciples the ability to speak the native language of each person gathered in Jerusalem from every nation

under heaven. In doing this, the LORD undid Babel's curse. He provided a rallying point for all people to come together in perfect unity and love. And what is that rallying point? It's the good news of God's love for us in Christ.

Jesus is not just a Jewish Savior. He is the Savior of us all. He broke down the barrier and destroyed the dividing wall of hostility that not only existed between us and God, but also between us and the rest of humanity as a result of Babel. Christ came to make us one united family again, members of one great city. This city is the Holy Christian Church - the new Jerusalem. In this city God feeds us with his Gospel. He keeps us safe from all harm. He gives us an eternal name that far exceeds anything we could have hoped to obtain on our own.

Through faith in Christ, we are members of God's Church; and as such God wants us to go out into every nook and cranny of this world where there are people: telling them that God has fulfilled his promise and sent his Savior. God promises to use our witness to gather his elect from every tribe and nation. He will gather them into this new city - just like he gathered us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: What do you want to build? A comfortable earthly life, dedicated to self but that will soon perish? Or do you want to be a coworker with Christ - using the time, talents and gifts God has given you to help build the eternal Church of God? For this purpose the LORD forgave all your sins and adopted you into his family through Holy Baptism. Let us, then, follow the Spirit's leading and dedicate our lives to the Gospel - doing all we can to preserve and share it. Amen.