



Making a Name for Ourselves

TEXT
Genesis 11:1–9

October 1, 2017 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 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 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.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 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. 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.

Arrogance. Pride. Ugh. These human beings. These mortals. It is one of the great stories in early Genesis. After Noah and the flood, it says the whole earth had one language and the same words. They were all the same, one culture. And they settled together upon a plain in Shinar, a place we do not know for certain, but there is archaeological evidence of ancient ziggurats, the largest one built near the ancient city of Ur — massive buildings and even a crumbling tower — about 225 miles south of Baghdad in Iraq.

They decide to build a great city and a great tower with its “top in the heavens” to make a name for themselves; otherwise, they say, they will be scattered across the face of the whole earth. Human pride. Hubris. Let’s build a tower with its top in the heavens. Let’s make a name for ourselves.

God is threatened. “This is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

So God comes to earth and scatters the people. God gives them different languages and different cultures. Read this

way, different languages and different cultures, diversity itself, is a punishment. Difference and diversity is a consequence for human pride.

For much of Christendom, this has been the traditional interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel. Human hubris and pride. We are punished with diversity.

But of late, in the latter part of the last century and now even more in the 21st century, Bible scholars have been positing a different way to read this story.

It started when Terrence Fretheim at the University of Chicago discovered a number of ancient Hebrew writings that used the exact same phrase: its top in the heavens. But the writers were not describing a human made tower; they were describing trees and mountains. Professor Fretheim argued that this phrase in Genesis is not about challenging God. Rather this phrase is simply what people would say when they saw something that was tall and grand.

Dr. Fretheim says this is similar to how we use the words *skyscraper* or *high rise* today. When someone says we have two skyscrapers going up in downtown Kansas City, they are not challenging God’s author-

ity or power. They are simply describing tall structures.

Then Dutch scholar Ellen Van Wolde wrote that this phrase “let us make a name for ourselves” is better translated “let us make ONE name for ourselves.” It appears, she wrote, that the people didn’t want multiple names. They all wanted to be known as one name.

This led Fernando Segovia, who teaches at Vanderbilt University, to wonder if the problem here is not human pride and human arrogance. The problem here is that the people wanted to be the same. They wanted to speak the same language, and they wanted to share the same culture.

Segovia says this makes sense given what God says in verse six, “Look, they are ONE people, and they have all ONE language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” Professor Segovia writes that when God says “this is only the beginning of what they will do and nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them,” God is not threatened by human beings and their power. Rather, God is annoyed because human beings will turn inward and focus only on themselves.

Dr. Ted Hiebert, who teaches at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, supports this new reading. After all, he says, why would the God of the universe be threatened by human beings? No, God is not threatened by human beings and our feeble attempts at power. God is neither

that weak nor insecure. Instead, God is angered because human beings wanted to be the same. One people. One name. One language. One culture. And that was not God’s plan.

Friends, think about it. Diversity and difference are not God’s punishment. Diversity and difference are God’s intention — God’s design.

Absolutely, on this World Communion Sunday, God calls us to be one. But thanks be to God that does not mean we have to be the same. Oneness does not equal sameness. Unity does not equal uniformity. God loves difference and creativity. Just think about the creation.

If you doubt that God is creative and imaginative, I have one word for you: platypus (an egg-laying, duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed mammal). Were you just having an off day, God? Were you just bored? Did you just have some leftover parts laying around, and did you just say to yourself, “Oh, let’s just see what we can put together”; and then when you did, did you not say to yourself, “Well, if that isn’t the oddest thing I have ever made. I kinda like it”? It is the only creature in its biological family and genus. And God loves it.

God is a god of creativity and imagination and diversity and difference. Yet I am worried that now, more than ever, we see difference as a threat and a problem.

So in December 1941, the empire of Japan did a horrible and despicable thing. They attacked the United States of

America at Pearl Harbor. Over 3,000 Americans lost their lives, and we went to war.

In February 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that ordered the incarceration of all persons of Japanese descent in much of California, Washington and Oregon. Two months later, orders were sent to 120,000 persons to leave their homes, farms, businesses. They had three days. They did not know where they were going.

Alice was nine years old. She and her mother and young brother packed up their farm. Their father and husband had been picked up by the FBI two months earlier, and they did not know where he was. Alice was born in California. She was an American citizen. So was her brother Harry. Her mother and father were both born in California. They were all American citizens. None of them had even been to Japan.

Alice remembers the days as being frantic and frightening. She helped her mother the best she could and took care of her little brother. They could take only what they could carry. They walked to downtown Vacaville, California, with the other members of the Japanese American community to wait for buses. She remembers there being soldiers there.

When they arrived, having walked three miles from their farm, they sat down, and Harry said he was hungry, and he asked his Mom for something to eat. At that point, Alice remembers seeing her mother break down

and cry for the first time. She apologized to her children and told them she was sorry — that in the hurry to pack, she forgot to make food for them. She apologized to them for being such a poor mother.

Alice remembers scolding Harry for making Mama cry. She left to go see if she could find something to eat and drink. In the crowd, there was a tall white woman with a tray of sandwiches and fruit and cups of juice. Alice went up to her and asked her if she was selling the food. The woman smiled and said no. She offered the food to Alice for free. Alice refused and said she could pay. The woman insisted. She said that she was a Quaker, a Christian friend, and she said they thought what the government was doing was wrong, so people in her church made sandwiches and brought cups of juice and fruit to give away.

Alice took some back to her mother and brother. Her mother told her to take it back because they had no Christian friends. She said white people hate us because we are different, because we are Japanese. Alice tried to take the food back, but the kind lady came and explained to Alice's mother that she was a Christian friend.

Alice and her mother and brother boarded a bus and were taken to the Tanforan Race Track in San Mateo, where they lived in a horse stall for six months. Then they were sent by train to an internment camp in Gila River, Arizona, just south of Phoenix, where they lived for

two and a half years. To their joy, her father eventually joined them there. He had been incarcerated with Buddhist priests and schoolteachers and other Japanese community leaders in a prison in South Dakota and was released when the government decided he was not a threat to national security.

When the war was over, they moved to Pocatello, Idaho, and began farming again. There, Alice met Becky, a Nazarene, who invited Alice to sleep over at her house and go to church on Sunday. Alice's mother said she could go only because Becky said she was a "Christian friend." At that church, Alice received Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. Eventually, the family moved to Hayward, California, to start all over. Right away, Alice began worshipping at the San Lorenzo Japanese Christian church, and she took Harry and then her parents, who all came to Christ.

When Alice was a college student, a young seminarian from Berkley Baptist Divinity School came to the church to serve as student pastor. Alice thought he was handsome, but a little conceited. The seminary student remembers thinking Alice was smart and beautiful. He asked her out on a date, and she said no. He was persistent. Finally, she said yes, and they fell in love and married. Alice and Richard had four sons. One of them is an optometrist in Los Angeles. One of them just retired as an air traffic controller in Honolulu. One of them works for a nonprofit agency in Seattle

with immigrant families. And one of them has the great honor and privilege to be preaching today at the Village Presbyterian Church. Alice Tamura Nishioka is my mother, and I am so proud to be her son.

I am standing here today because at a moment when my mother and uncle and grandmother were terrified and uncertain about their future, a kind white woman, a Quaker, a Christian friend, did not see being different as a threat or a problem. She saw difference as a gift to be affirmed and celebrated.

The God of the universe was not threatened by the feeble plans of these humans. God came down because they all wanted to be the same, and that is not God's plan for us.

Unity does not equal uniformity. Oneness does not equal sameness. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.