

Tower of Confusion - Genesis 11:1-9; Isaiah 14:3-17

What do we mean when we use the word 'story'? When I stayed with my grandmother during the school holidays, every morning she would tell my brother and me a story about Peter and Jane, two fictional characters based on two of my much older cousins. At school, children are asked to write a story and that usually means - make one up. And they start with "Once upon a time..." Also, when I was younger, my parents used to accuse me of 'telling stories' rather than lying. So that all adds up in my mind, at any rate, that a story is usually made up.

Yet, we often refer to the Bible as a story, and this might be a good time to explain what we mean when we say that. We don't mean that the Bible is fiction. We want people to understand that we are to read it as one big story instead of many isolated episodes. And if we think on, "story" doesn't have to mean fiction. Have you ever asked someone to tell you their story? You weren't looking for them to tell you a made-up account, were you? No, you wanted them to tell you about themselves—truly who they are. In other words, their history. That is why we often say the Bible is the story of God - it tells us who he is and what he is like.

Last week, we looked at the flood - God judging humanity for their wrongdoing and starting again with Noah and his family. In fact Genesis 3-11 has been a cascade of horrible stories. I would remind you that the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that humanity has been made in the image of God - he wants to reign over the world through His image-bearing creatures as they follow his lead. But they decided, after listening to a snake, who is later identified as a fallen angel in rebellion against God, that they did not trust God. So the rot, and the human rebellion, set in. God sent a flood, saving just the one righteous man, Noah, and his family.

But, the 'wash' did not last and we finished a week ago with Noah blessing two of his sons, but cursing the family of the third son, Ham, who had committed some unmentionable act towards him. Ham's son Canaan's descendants would be the bane of the Israelites when they entered their promised land 900 years later. Then the story tells how Noah's sons repopulated the earth after the flood. We hear about Nimrod, whose name means 'Rebel'. He was a "mighty hunter before the Lord", which might sound positive but commentators think a better translation is 'against the Lord'. Jewish writings say he was powerful in hunting and in wickedness against the Lord, for he was a hunter of the sons of men, and he said to them, 'Depart from the judgment of the Lord, and adhere to the judgment of Nimrod!' I wonder if Elgar realised that when he named one of his Enigma variations after him - seemingly so peaceful and serene.

We are told that Nimrod was the founder of the city of Babel, later to be known as Babylon, which is equated throughout the Bible as an evil place. Whenever it is mentioned, it implies rebellion against God in ways that must be described as spiritual as well as physical. We heard in our second reading one of those negative connotations concerning Babel, with the taunt of Isaiah concerning the king of Babylon at first, but then moving into a strong prophesy against the Day Star.

*How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart "I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon;
I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High."
But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit.*

Who is the Day Star, son of Dawn? Well in other translations, he is known as Lucifer. His connection with Babylon is seen in this proverb which begins with the human king in view, but soon goes far beyond what could be said of the human king to identify the spiritual power motivating the king. An angel - Lucifer means 'light-bringer' - who apparently, according to the prophet Ezekiel, became so impressed with his own beauty, intelligence, power, and po-

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sition that he began to desire for himself the honour and glory that belonged to God alone. He decided he wanted to be supreme - notice the five 'I will's in this passage - above the Creator God, Elohim - and thus God expelled him from the heavenly places and changed his name to Satan which means 'adversary'. The Bible implies that he has been active in the affairs of the world since the creation of humanity, so it is no surprise to find his influence in the realm of corrupt kings and kingdoms at the start of history. You will hear more about him at the beginning of Lent, when Jesus confronts him in the wilderness and Jesus himself calls him a murderer and a liar.

Back to Nimrod - we are told that he built a kingdom - which totally usurps the idea of God putting humans as a whole to rule the earth on his behalf. Here Nimrod was doing it for himself, in rebellion against God. And the Babylonians then go and build a tower.

The grace in this story takes some finding, because it is primarily a story of judgment. The people, en masse, turn away from God and find their security and significance in their own achievements; God responds with a judgment which is complete and decisive. Each of their ambitions and hopes is overturned and their scheme unravels as God intervenes in the situation. They had planned to build a city with a great tower; in the end they give up building both. They want to gather together; but in the end they are scattered. Lastly, they want to make a great name for themselves; but in the end, they do get a name, but it is not the great name they wanted; their name the name they are known as - Babel - means "confused". They are indeed remembered by those who came after them, but for their folly, rather than their greatness.

God comes down to see this tower. 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."* The danger that God identifies in both the tree of life and the tower of Babel is simple. It is our ability, day after day, to give ourselves over to sin. God intervenes not to protect his power, but to protect us from the power of our own corruption. Whether it is eating from the tree of life after choosing not to trust God or trying to make ourselves divine by our own efforts, the confusion of languages is God's way of protecting human beings from themselves – it mitigates against the social corruption of sin. It is an act of mercy-in-judgment. Once again, we can see God's grace at work.

So the people were scattered and languages divided. At Babel, as another commentator said, God halts the unbribed human efforts to build a united, secular city, which would leave no room for the kingdom of God. And you also might find that anthropologists believe that the 7000 or so languages that are in the world today trace back to an original 12, which makes good sense of this story.

The flood was not the cure for sin - the flood did not crush the serpent's head. Humanity still needed that deliverer - and this is where God changed tack. Instead of continuing to give all humans the chance to do the right thing in a good world, which they keep ruining, he waits three hundred years and then calls one man and his wife and commits to working with him and his family. We are about to meet a man named Abram, the one through whom the snake crusher and the blessings would come. The rest of the story of God in Genesis concentrates on his family.