

1

I once served a congregation that had grown smaller over the years, and so had another Disciples congregation in the neighboring community. The two congregations began having conversations about selling both churches and building a new church. They purchased land in the middle of a new neighborhood, put both church buildings up for sale, and hired an architect to design a new building. As we dreamed about our future together, someone jokingly suggested we install a pulpit with a remote control, that when the sermon was going too long, someone could flip the switch, a trap door would open, and the speaker would automatically sink into the floor.

All was going smoothly with the plans until the economy bottomed out, building materials suddenly increased, and the bank would not give the church a loan. All our building plans went awry.

We felt a bit like the people in the story from Genesis, who had a vision of building a tower, but their building plans also went awry.

Unlike the congregation's vision of building a church as a place of worship, those building the

legendary tower wanted to be more like God, having their structure reach into heaven, placing themselves on the same level as God.

So what happened to the tower? The story says that God decided to confuse the builders by creating multiple languages so they could no longer speak to one another, thereby making it difficult to cooperate, so their building plans went awry. The planned tower to heaven became a tower of babel when everyone babbled and could not understand one another, thereby being unable to work together.

Some have suggested the story refers to towers built in Babylon during the exile when God's people were forced to build such towers. It's tempting to try search for that incomplete tower, and wonder if God intentionally created multiple languages to confuse us. In doing so, we might miss the point of the story—that we humans often strive to be like God, placing ourselves in power over others.

A clay cylinder discovered in the 1850s gives us a little insight into possible background of this story from Genesis. The cylinder was written about

2

King Sargon II, who was the king of Assyria. He's likely the one who invaded and conquered the northern part of Israel 700 years before Jesus was born.

The scroll proclaims the greatness of the king, listing all his military conquests and building projects. The king proclaimed, "The subjects of the four (quarters of the world), of foreign tongues (and) without common language, dwellers of mountains and lowlands...I carried off as spoils by the power of my scepter, I made them of single mind, and settled them therein."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the inscription suggests that the king built a great tower and unified all people into one language. In reality, the king died in battle and his body was never recovered, he was forgotten for much of history, the Assyrian empire disappeared, and the king did not unite everyone into one mind and language. Dr. Andrew Giorgetti, professor at Sterling College, suggests that the story in Genesis 11 mock's the king of Assyria and his unrealistic boasting.<sup>2</sup>

I think that the story in Genesis about the Tower of Babel also reflects the reality of the world—for we have many people, many languages, and the fact that our plans do not always go the way we anticipate.

Have you ever started a project and found yourself unable to finish it? Or have you started a project and discovered that you don't know enough to complete it, as was the case with

a fellow at the lumber yard who asks for some four-by-twos. The clerk says, "You mean two-by-fours?" He says, "Just a moment, I'll check." He goes back to his car where his friends are sitting, they roll down the windows, and he has a short conversation with them. He returns and says, "Yes, I mean two-by-fours."

The merchant asks, "How long do you want them?" The fellow says, "Just a minute, I'll check," and he confers with his friends in the car once again. He chats with them for a couple of minutes and comes back and answers, "A long time. We're building a house."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus once told a parable about a rich man building a barn since he had so many resources he didn't know where to store them all. He thought he

3

could tear down his barn, build a new one, and sit around eating and drinking happily ever after. That night he died. Jesus asked, “Who gets all the rich man’s stuff?” The story ends by observing, “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”<sup>4</sup>

Or maybe you remember Jesus’ story of the wise builder who built a house on the rock, and even in the storms, it stood firm. The foolish builder, however, built a house on sand, and when the rain came, the house was washed away.

Jesus seemed to echo the message of the Tower of Babel, that when we try to build our lives without God, our building projects will go awry. In the storms of life, however, Jesus serves as a strong foundation, helping us face the days when we feel blown around.

Even when we have differences in opinion, even when our lives get battered by storms and struggles, even when we can’t seem to build the

kind of lives we want, and even when our different languages hamper our ability to communicate, we are still all part of God’s family, one nation, one world, one people created by a loving God.

Even though we are one in God’s family, we still have our differences. We don’t all appear the same. We have different tastes in music or in the way we dress. We even speak differently, and yet we are one. Let’s hear how various languages say the word *one*...

These words may sound like babel, unrecognizable to many of our ears, and yet, they all say the same thing: one. Together we live on one planet and come from one family—the kin-dom of God, a place where we’re all related, all kin, for God created us all. Even when our building projects go awry or your life falls apart, God’s loving arms will help rebuild your life.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://museum.imj.org.il/journal/archive/2018-2019/pdf/cylinder.pdf>.

---

<sup>2</sup> General Assembly Preaching Resource, 2023, p. 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Hodgin, Michael. 1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking (p. 201). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #154.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 12:21, *The Message*.