

Sermon: Hope for Ourselves

Series: Advent – Hope is Born (4)

Bible Passage: Genesis 11:1-9

We're going to look at a passage that I doubt has been preached in celebration of Christmas – the famous story of the Tower of Babel, the downfall of humanity's vain search for glory. Yes, that's our Christmas passage for this morning.

Genesis 11:1-9:

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. **2** And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** 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. **4** 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." **5** And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. **6** And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. **7** Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." **8** So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. **9** Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

I invite you to bow your heads and pray with me.

Heavenly Father, help us, on this Sunday morning as we gather as a church or as friends. We pray that You would teach us from your Word. Lord, in a time of year I think we either a burst of hope, with all the Christmas and holiday cheer, or we feel a drain of hope as society, the loneliness of the holidays. Help us see through those things, to really see the state of our affairs of our hope or the lack thereof. Help us to see, from this passage and your Bible, how the birth of Jesus may be the only and ultimate source of hope for our people and for the world. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

A few years ago, there was a building project in Chinatown. I had an income at that time and they were asking me for money. I had an opportunity to donate a certain amount of money, and

the incentive was this: if you donate a certain amount of money, you would get your name engraved on this display in the building for all eternity. I remember thinking, “Wow, is this really a big deal?” I remember thinking and praying about this and after Karen said okay, we saved money until we reached this threshold. I am ashamed to say that I was largely motivated by getting my name on the display. We donate the money, the building gets built, we go to the open house, I bring my old child to show him the display, and I say, “Look, there’s Mama and Baba’s name on that display for donating to the building.” My son says to me, “Where’s my name?” Furthermore, as I looked at the massive list of names, I realized that the amount I gave, that was a tremendous amount, was quite small. I did what any insecure person would do, and that is to read all the names of people who donated more than I did. I recognize some names from the people of church. I find myself feeling a bunch of feelings, thinking, “Oh man, what I gave was so little in comparison to other people.”

As I reflected on this, I realize that there is this hunger and insecurity that I think most of us have, especially if we are aware of it. That is the hunger for what the Bible would call glory. Something that makes us feel important and worthwhile, whether that’s striving for glory on the athletic field, there’s the sense that we want to be the best. Of course it shows up there, because when my desire to be named the best is threatened, I thrash out and feel insecure. You sense this in other fields such as work, industry, and art.

We have this passage here – the Tower of Babel, one of the earliest times humanity has this urge for glory. I believe this passage will teach us three things this morning that will relate back to Christmas, the birth of Christ:

1. What does humanity look for in glory?
2. What is God’s response to humanity’s quest for glory?
3. How does this relate to Christmas?

1. What does humanity look for in glory?

What does humanity’s search for glory look like in a very concrete, practical way. I want you to see what people are searching and yearning for. Let’s take a look at Genesis 11:1-4:

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. **2** And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** 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. **4** 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

Now this is kind of fascinating. Now, I understand this fantastical nature, and I know some of us are wondering whether this is archeologically attested in history. This morning's sermon is not going to address the history, although I believe that this really did happen. But for the purpose of Genesis, you need to know that the author put this in here for a very specific reason; in fact, to catch our attention, the author put it in the wrong chronological order. For us, in the modern days, we think of history as progressing through time, beginning with the ancient and ending with the modern. However, in those ancient texts, they were able to rearrange things as their theological goals allowed them.

If you were to read Genesis 10, 11, and 12, you would see that they already had different languages. In Genesis 10, the writer, who we believe to be Moses, said that the people were all descendents of Noah and they all had different languages. As a disjointed transition, the author says in Genesis 11 that all the people had one language. He is trying to help us see that this is a significant story. He is willing to interrupt this list of historical genealogies to tell us. In this time, he is explaining that this is how we became to be a massive human race with many different languages and cultures, and that it was, in fact, Biblical and God's work.

Notice the subtle point in verse 2. In the ancient Jewish world, they were very well familiar with the chapters of Genesis. "East" is very significant theologically. Some of you may know of a very famous American novel "East of Eden", which reminds us of Genesis 3, when humanity fell. When Adam and Eve fell, they had to go east of Eden. When Cain killed Abel, he had to go east and build a city. If you know your Old Testament, when Abram and Lot had to choose who got the nicer land, Lot chose the fertile land and Abram moved east. The idea of eastward is a sense of humanity looking for home. All the Jewish readers would have known this, but we don't see how much it matters. It does matter.

Here we're already seeing clues that this is an important story and has to do with man's search for home, for security, for everlasting permanence, for comfort, and for glory. What does humanity's search for glory tangibly look like? Here's what I want you to see: we desperately want to be remembered. We see this in the story because here is what people say to each other. Let's take a look at verse 3:

³ 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. ⁴ 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

The people said this: we want to make a name for ourselves. So they chose the form of a city and a tower. We want to be collected and gathered, a mighty city, so that we will always be remembered. They will always talk about our grand city and our tower that reaches to the heavens. The desire for significance, the desire for security, and the desire for “my life is worth living” comes tangibly, especially as you get older in life. These are the questions we will ask: “will I be remembered?”, “how will I be remembered?”, and “who will remember me?”.

Like some of you, my mother is facing retirement. She’s been saying she’d do it for years, but she has been waiting for the timing in terms of finances to work out. You know how it is. She’s finally retiring from her years at Raytheon. As she talks about this, people have been giving her encouragement by saying “you left a mark here”, “you really made an impression”, or “we’re going to remember all that you’ve done”. Even the way we try to encourage people after a stint, a job, or a term is: “you’ve made a big difference and you will be remembered”. We erect memorials to remember our fallen soldiers, for the men and women who have fallen to protect our country. We erect memorials for donors. We erect memorials for our ancestors. We want to be remembered. We want to be talked about.

Years ago, Karen and I were one of the first couples to get married. After that, a lot of our friends started to get married. Uniquely, Karen and I could strategize about this very important topic – what should we buy for people when they get married? You can just use the directory and buy the first thing on the list or search by price. I, in my insecurity, thought, “No, I have to get something that every time they see it, they will think Enoch and Karen.” I remember a few years ago people were having their honey moon and I thought that we could give them a helicopter ride or this elaborate boat-thing.

Then, I remembered the person whose gift I’ve never forgotten, Byron. He gave me and Karen a gift that, when I first unwrapped, I thought was lame. It was a knife holder. To this day, most of you who have come over to my house and asked me for a knife have seen that wooden knife block that Byron Wang gave to us in 2000. Then I changed my strategy to give the people getting married something practical. The point is this: I don’t know if you can feel or relate to the idea, that after all you’ve done and all you’ve been through, don’t you want to be remembered? Don’t you want people to still talk about you? Don’t you want people to think “man, she was a great leader” or “man, he was a great friend”? If you can relate to this urge or the fear of being forgotten, then you know what Genesis is talking about.

We must make a name for ourselves. We must make a mark on this world. We must make a lasting impression. This is humanity's search for glory. I want you to know that this desire in of itself is not a problem. The problem is when it comes at the expense of our created purpose. This gets a little theological, so you'll have to stay with me here.

There is this desire to be remembered, but this desire can be distorted. In the beginning of Genesis, when the Bible records that God made Adam and Eve, He gave them a command. He said, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the Earth." Notice what they say here in chapter 11, verse 4:

4 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

The people and the author of Genesis are recording this sentiment: we want glory, but we want it in our own way. Not in the way God has intended it. The people state: we want to congregate, stick in one big area, and make a great city for ourselves, even though the Lord told us to go out into the world, cultivate and work the Earth, and spreading out. It's captured so perfectly in the concept of the tower.

We want to build a tower. Not just a tall tower. Not just a high tower. Not just a skyscraper; we want a heaven scraper. We want a tower so big, so grand, that it can reach into heaven. This is humanity's desire for glory distorted by sin. Now, our glory is inherently self-centered and inherently destructive to our society, to one another, and our relationships as we saw in the story of Cain and Abel, how we treat creation, and our relationship with God. This morning we want to see this: God created humanity with an appetite for glory. Humans, alone of all the animals in the animal kingdom, have a sense of glory and this insecurity. How have you tried to be remembered?

For those of you fortunate enough, some of you have some substantial contributions in your field. Maybe it was in high school, as a president or captain of a club, or in your workplace, as a project manager or engineer, or even in school now, as being the brightest kid. What have you tried to do to be remembered? For most of us, we're normal people with normal jobs and our jobs don't really distinguish us from other people. I'm a pastor and there are lots of other pastors.

I think this is what we tell ourselves: it's okay that no one remembers me, as long as my family remembers me. It's a worthwhile thought, but often times, it's our coping mechanism. However, now we've just made our family our own personal glory bank. Do we look at our children and say, "Your primary purpose in life is to remember me so I feel good when I die." It sounds

terrible, but that's essentially what we're saying. A lot our immigrant ancestors didn't really care to be remembered. They just wanted a better life for their children.

Here we have this notion: what does human experience, this hunger for glory, call us to do? We first see that it wants us to be remembered. We desperately don't want to be forgotten. To go down in history as infamous, evil, twisted, or terrible dictator is one thing, but to be forgotten in history? In a hundred years, how many people will know your name? Maybe some people in your family will remember you vague as great grandmother or great grandfather. Very few of us will ever be remembered. If that makes you sad or depressed, on the one hand, that's about right because we do have the desire to be remembered, but on the other hand, God did not intend for that to be.

2. What is God's response to humanity's quest for glory?

First of all, what is human's hunger for glory manifest in the form of? It is in the form of: we want to be remembered at our school, at our job, at our homes, anywhere. We want to be remembered. We scheme, plot, and plan about it.

Let's take a look at the Lord's response in verse 5-9:

⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

What does God do in response to our hunger to be remembered? God redirects our efforts. He doesn't just say, "Oh it's humanity, go ahead and do your thing" and he doesn't just stop it. God redirects it. I would say God redirects human efforts to achieve the ultimate glory, which we'll get to in our next point.

What does he actually do? I think this is so fascinating. I love Hebrew literature and one of the things you'll notice in Hebrew literature is the significant events. There are two significant events that happen in this passage. The people build the tower and God confuses their language. However, notice that neither of these events are talked about in this passage. It says "humans will build a great city and tower." It doesn't describe them doing it; it just says that they did. The

passage also says, “I’m going to confuse their language” and after that it simply says, “So the Lord dispersed them.” The point is to pay attention to the results. God redirected their energies from one thing; he went down and dispersed it.

One of my children’s Bibles at home has a part at the end of the passage that says, “People couldn’t understand each other’s languages, so God called it Babel because it sounded like Babel.” First of all, the English language was not used back then. Secondly, that’s not the point. The dominant world power, both religiously and militarily, at the time, was the Neo-Babylonian Empire. When the author of Genesis writes it, he takes the word called “Babel”, which sounds a lot like the Hebrew word “balal” which means mixed up and confused. In fact, most of these words in this Hebrew text has the sounds b, n, and l. The entire sound of this passage is to remind people “Babel” and “Babylon” is about confusion. It’s an apologetic against the dominant world power at the time.

That’s why they talk about bricks for stone. In verse 3, the passage reads:

³ 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.

The ancient Jews used brick to build. The ancient Babylonians used stone. Stone was supposed to be more resistant, more resilient, and a new technological advancement.

What does God do? He redirects their efforts to show the world power at the time, the Babylonian Empire, the religious leader and military machine, was second to the God of the Bible. When it says that he went down to confuse them, he redirected their energies. It’s kind of anti-climactic. At the end, the people were so confused because of language that they dispersed and left.

Even in the church today, all the languages are appreciated as being beautiful and rich. Yes, the richness and diversity in languages today is amazing. The culture associated with the languages is amazing. That being said, the rich diversity of languages in this world is a reminder of humanity’s failed attempt at self-glory. Ironically, it’s that language barrier that separates so much of this world. In a church like this with many immigrant families, language separates parents from children, spouses from in-laws, culture from culture. The irony is by human efforts to become united in this amazing people, God just gives us different languages and forever we are overcoming that barrier. God redirected their efforts.

This passage is just dripping with irony. What did people want in the beginning? To make a name for themselves so they could be all in one place and not be dispersed. Look at the result. Let's take a look at verse 8 and 9 again:

⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

The irony is that the very thing the people didn't want to have happen happened, which is like the proverb in Proverbs 10:24:

²⁴ What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Well I guess you got what you deserved?" That's actually from the Bible. Here we have this result: People, you and I, have this desire to be remembered by our family, our friends, our coworkers, our colleagues, but God redirects that desire to be remembered to something else. What does God redirect that to? How does this, the downfall of humanity's first major attempt of being remembered, even relate to Christmas?

3. How does this relate to Christmas?

We'll get there by going to the sweetest, most dripping piece of irony in this passage. People have said, "I'm going to build the greatest tower that is going to reach into the heavens." You would wonder, if humans are writing this, how did God find out about the tower? God would be sitting there in heaven one day, metaphorically high and above the earth, and he would look down at his floor to see this tower breaking through. That's not how the Bible records God's viewing of the tower.

In order for God to view this vast power, what does he have to do? Let's take a look at verse 5 and 7:

⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.

⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

This is brilliant. The Bible writers don't say "And the Lord thought the tower was small" or "And the Lord thought the tower was puny", the Bible simply says this: And the Lord had to crane his neck and go "What are they doing down there?" and go down to check out what humanity was doing. Obviously, God knows, but this is the Bible's way of saying: no matter what big thing we do, we can never reach the height of heaven. God has to come down.

What does this have to do with Christmas? The first advent, the first coming of Christ? Simple. People can never build their way up to God. God always has to come down. Christmas is God looking for thousands of years of humanity trying to climb their way back up after the fall. That's not going to happen. Christmas is the Father sending his son to go down. When the son goes down, then humans can truly find their glory and being remembered, not for ourselves, but for the importance of a higher cause and calling.

One of my good friends this summer found himself at an outdoor festival, a community event in Cambridge. There were many people at a park for the community event. Gunshots rang out. As people were running away, my friend, who was an off-duty EMT and cop, started to run towards the gunshots. He saw a little African-American girl bleeding and performed CPR on her to keep her alive until the on-duty staff came to take over. In the end, he was awarded a citation from the city of Cambridge from the mayor himself. My friend was written about in the paper and everything. It was pretty amazing.

Someone asked him, "What's it like? What's going on in your head? All these people are running away and you're grabbing your medical stuff and running towards the gunshots!" In all modesty, he said, "I wasn't really thinking. All I was thinking is that someone over there probably needs help and I can do it, so I'm going to go." There is this amazing picture of everyone running away and this lone guy with his little bag of medical supplies, who wasn't even armed that day, running towards the gunshots.

A part of me that's commendable and a great testimony to the amazing training our medical staff and our first responders receive in this society. I don't want to take away anything from his heroics; he saved someone's life. However, what I do want to say is Jesus is better. Jesus in his perfect wisdom was fully aware of the cost of coming down to Earth. He knew he would be ridiculed. He knew he would have to take on human form and human nature. He knew that he would be persecuted, mocked, abandoned, betrayed, falsely accused, have a sham for a trial, and damned to death next to murderers and thieves. He knew that he would be remembered, from the human standpoint, as a traitor and basically, a treasonous, treacherous blasphemer. Jesus chose the memory of a crucified thief on a cross, so we could have the glorious joy of having the greatest remembrance ever: being a member of God's family.

This is amazing. The very thing you and I want to be remembered for. Some of you right now are angling your careers. You're thinking, "If I can do this, I will be remembered" whether that's getting on a board, winning an election, or making a project a success. Do you understand that

you want a savior? All your impulses to be remembered by your loved ones, your friends, your community, it all speaks to a deeper yearning that I promise you, having children, winning an election, or being awarded in your field, does not take away. In the end, I don't remember the winners of all the awards. Do you? I don't remember who held the records that were broken. Do you? We need to have something that goes past that and the only thing that goes past that is being remembered in the family of God. That's what Christmas is about. Hope for ourselves.

John Piper, a pastor, describes how being swallowed up by a vast glory is what we want. He describes going to the Grand Canyon, standing on the edge, and seeing the vastness of the tremendous canyon before you. When you see the enormity of it, you realize you're really small. You want to revel in the fact that this thing is so large, that if you fell into it, it would swallow you up and you wouldn't even be a drop; that's exciting. It's like looking at the sky at the incredible number of stars and galaxies millions of miles away. As you sense the enormity of the universe that we know, and you feel your smallness in it, that's a good place. I'm not God. You're not God. I'm so glad to know that there is something larger than the Grand Canyon, more numerous than the stars, and deeper than the oceans, and that's our God and His love for us.

As we think about this this coming week and about Christmas time, I want to ask you: what have you been trying to do to be remembered by people? I'm not even suggesting that you change those efforts. I'm asking: would you look underneath them and see that deep inside under all those efforts to be remembered, is a yearning that those things cannot give you. They can promise you a sense of significance, a sense of importance, and a sense of worthiness, but I think they're empty. Something is going to have to transcend all of that, and the only thing that transcends this world is God. God came down to see the tower and disperse the people.

The Bible says in Zephaniah 3:9:

⁹ "For at that time I will change the speech of the people to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.

The reversal of Babel is in our future. All the efforts you've done to be remembered, they won't be satisfied until you find it in Christ, who came down, as a little baby, to save us all.

Let's bow our heads and consider that.

Father, I want to confess you my profound insecurity. In my world, I want to be remembered as a great pastor, hopefully a decent preacher, someone who loved his sheep, a good father, a good husband, whatever. Lord, forgive me and would you replace those things with a desire that says: I want you to be remembered because you are the only one worthy of remembrance. As we find our life and purpose in you and as you, in your goodness, share your glory and your hope of heaven with us, we ask that that would ease us of this.

Father, some of us are doing incredible work in our fields and in our industries and our schools, and we will be remembered, maybe for a long time, and I praise you for that. However, I pray that any time we ever feel this impulse "People are going to remember me! This is going to be tweeted about, talked about, remembered for the next couple years!", Lord help us to know that that's just an echo for our deep desire to be remembered. Father, you know us by name and you remember us.

Father, gather up people that help other people find this great glory in your son. Help us to see that Christmas is you coming down, not to confuse our speech this time, but to form yourself a people, a church that you may share your goodness of hope and forgiveness of sins with others. Form yourself a people, a church so that we might make disciples and ultimately more followers of Christ that know Him, His forgiveness, and His glory. Help us today. For those of us who are so yearning to be remembered, help us to find that in Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.