

June 9th: [tower]

As we mentioned during the announcements, we have begun a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

Last week, Pastor Heather introduced this topic and she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. When in displacement, we might feel adrift or lost, or perhaps anxious and afraid, or maybe insecure or bitter. We might have lost sight of the people, place, or objects that make us feel safe and at home, so we feel a deep sense of vulnerability. This month, we’re focusing on stories of involuntary displacement—so examples from our biblical story where displacement and disorientation is outside of human control.

So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

Before we begin, let’s pray.

God our refuge, we come to you with broken hearts and tired minds, worn out from our week and anxious for the week ahead. Empty those thoughts from us now, and attune our attention to your holy voice—the voice that is calling us into peace and rest. Prepare us for the comfort and wisdom that you have for us, and fill us with your divine love so that we might continue on the path that we are traveling. Amen.

Some of you might know that I love learning languages—it's been a passion and a hobby of mine since I was teenager.

In highschool, I began taking Spanish, and I was amazed at how much I enjoyed these new sounds and words—it was like believing that the whole world was black and white, and then suddenly being exposed to an entire rainbow of colors. Then when I started my freshman year of college, I was convinced that I wanted to study abroad, so I added Italian to my course load. It was similar enough to Spanish that I picked it up pretty easily, and I marveled at how melodious and sophisticated it sounded as I daydreamed about gelato and tuscan villas.

By the time I got to seminary, I was introduced to biblical languages—and while everyone else dreaded the summer intensives of Greek and Hebrew, I delighted in spending six weeks, up to ten hours each day, studying these ancient alphabets and trying to piece together different translations. And so two additional languages became four. With English, that makes five—five sets of vocabulary, five sets of grammar, five ways to conjugate a simple present tense verb, and five ways to confuse myself when I try to find the right thing to say.

So as much as I love learning languages, it's not always fun, and not always easy.

After decades of study, all of these languages make for a confusing mess inside my head. Unfortunately, it's one big cognitive mush, and I often struggle to even have the kind of basic conversation that I've practiced over and over again and should definitely be able to handle. Sometimes I can't find a word in Italian, but I know the equivalent in Spanish—or I want to use a Spanish phrase but can only bring to mind the Italian version. Sometimes I lose a word or two altogether, only to awaken from a deep sleep in the middle of the night with that exact word on my tongue. And sometimes the weirdest thing happens—I'll hear a sentence or clip of someone speaking in one of these languages and know what they're saying, but have no way to translate it into my native English. My brain somehow understands, but it gets lost in translation.

And this confusion can result in some pretty uncomfortable situations, situations that I'd rather avoid, because I don't enjoy feeling embarrassed, or vulnerable, or exposed.

Once, when leading a trip to Italy for college students, I was determined to use the Italian that was swirling inside my head, but it turned into a comedy of errors. Our tour group was visiting the Vatican that day, and several of us were in desperate need of a bathroom, so I went up to the nearest security guard and politely asked if he could direct me to the ladies room. I guess my accent was not as good as it used to be, because he answered me in Spanish. After a brief pause on my end, I responded to him in Spanish, but again, I think we misunderstood each other, because this time he asked me if I spoke French. I answered in the three words of very bad French that I learned from my Quebecois grandfather, but this seemed to confuse him even more, and so when we finally settled on English and a few gestures, I finally found the bathroom.

I share all of this because our story for today is also a narrative of linguistic confusion and a text about what human beings do when faced with experiences of deep vulnerability.

In this passage from the book of Genesis, the very first book of our Bible, we have this record of a moment in time after the time of Noah and the great flood—when the next generation of God's family is born. In Genesis chapter 10, we have a full family tree of Noah's sons, and they are listed out for the purpose of telling our spiritual ancestors that once more God's people have been fruitful and have multiplied, as they were instructed. From Noah's three sons, we have entire nations that spring up—from Japheth's line are born the Kittitites and the Rodanites, from Ham's line are born the Canaanites, Cushites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Girkashites, and from Shem's line are born Elamites, Aramites, and more—including the biblical patriarch Abram, or Abraham.

As the family grows, and more branches of the tree are formed, we're supposed to understand that they are still united by this common identity as God's people—they are still under this covenant that God had made with their ancestor Noah. This promise of new life and flourishing is supposed to be their common goal and purpose. The assignment that God has given them is to fill the earth—literally to spread out to every corner of the world and settle there in order to repopulate the globe.

But when we get to Genesis chapter 11, we hear that these different clans and tribes have a different identity and purpose in mind for themselves.

The first few verses of this chapter give us some background information about our setting—they tell us that all of these clans and tribes begin to settle in the east, in a fertile plain in a land called Shinar. At this point, everyone speaks the same language, they're able to communicate with each other. And this level of same-ness and safety is comfortable for them. In this new, homogenous place they started to make some innovations—baking bricks instead of quarrying stone, and using tar to bind the bricks together. And this gives them an idea— they say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

From this conversation, we get the sense that these clans and tribes have a deep fear of being displaced—they don't want to be a nomadic people wandering the desert or pitching tents in different lands. The experience of the flood has made them incredibly anxious about being disoriented—they don't want to migrate, or rebuild their houses every generation, or deal with the headache of settling in a new place. They decide that the answer to their fear of displacement is to build their own city—a permanent home. This will be the place where they can feel safe, and where they can hide from those complicated emotions.

Together, they make a common goal to build a tower so tall that it reaches God's realm, so that they can feel as powerful and as strong as God. This tower will remind them that this city is their fortress, their protection against future

anxiety or suffering or vulnerability. And in building this city and this tower, they want to make a new name for themselves—a name rooted in their own skill, their own ability—not rooted in being God’s people saved for God’s purposes. Intentionally or unintentionally, this project becomes about their own egos and their own desires.

But this presents a problem, because this is not what God intended.

In verses 6 and 7, God responds, “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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” Our passage ends with these concluding statements: “So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 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.”

I know this sounds unsettling—we might ask, why would God do this to the people that he promised to protect? Why would God intentionally bring about displacement, when displacement is such a difficult experience?

Those are good questions, and definitely worth considering, so if that’s something you want to wrestle with this week, that’s a great place to start. It’s natural that we would be uncomfortable with the idea that God is the one to cause such disorientation—first with the flood, and then with this linguistic confusion.

But I think we also need to consider that this scattering of Noah’s sons isn’t a punishment that God imposes on these clans—it’s not intended to shame or injure or harm anyone, but it is intended to fulfill the relational promise that God and human beings made together.

In her book, *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0*, the scholar Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil wrote, “The kinship group that we encounter in Genesis 11 was refusing to migrate any further... They chose instead to disregard the diversifying process and hold fast to their homogeneity... God’s response to

the people's refusal to migrate in Genesis 11 was to confuse their language and scatter them in order to bring about the divine will and original purpose for humanity, which is to fill the earth with the glory of God.”¹

This story reminds us that it was always God's plan that the growth of creation and the growth of humanity would result in diversity and divergence—God hoped that human beings would have unique experiences, and unique gifts, and unique expressions of faithfulness. This might have felt like punishment to our spiritual ancestors, because it disrupts our desire for sameness and it removes us from what we perceive as safe—but it was intended to result in flourishing for everyone.

And this flourishing isn't something that we can create with our own power, it's not something we can build with our human hands. It's not something that we can engineer without God.

And so Rev. Dr. Brenda continues, “God resists our empire-building tendency toward homogeneity and causes us to realize our human limitations. This forces us to recognize our interdependence with others and our need for reconciliation... We *need* our differences in order to reflect the glory of God, which is our mission and human calling.”²

In order for us to live into this calling, and to be part of God's vision for human flourishing, we might need to reflect on our own experiences of displacement, and to examine the emotions we feel when we do encounter our human limitations and vulnerable moments.

So as we begin a new week, I invite you to think deeply about a few questions—maybe take some time before bed to pray, or reflect when you're out for a walk, or as you're driving home from work. If you have a few moments, you can re-read this story from Genesis chapter 11, think about our

¹ Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0, pages 29-31

² Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0, pages 29-31

human tendency to run or hide from our complicated emotions and ask yourself–

What am I doing in my life to distract myself from the discomfort of displacement?

What ego driven behaviors am I engaging in in order to protect myself from feeling vulnerable?

How is God inviting me into displacement so that I can be part of our common mission of flourishing? How can I trust in God's plan and have courage, even if I feel disoriented or scared?

My friends, as we continue to discover what scripture has for us and as we continue to navigate all kinds of changes and disruptions to our lives, I want you to hear this good news: God is deeply invested in our flourishing. God cares about creation, God cares about your family, and God cares about you. God wants a relationship with you, so that he can create growth in and through you. That growth might be through children, or the next generation, or it might be in the multiplication of disciples, or the expansion of your impact in our community, but the same God who made a promise to Noah is making a promise to you.

That promise doesn't always mean that we'll have a physical place to call home, and it doesn't mean that there will never be confusion or vulnerability, but the promise does mean that the home we have with God will stand the test of time. The home that God has created for us is a home that we will never lose, and a home that we never have to leave. The home we have with God is not a tower, but the safety of a loving embrace.

Amen.