

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 11:1-9, “Control Tower”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/9/2025

Anyone know someone who is flying this weekend? (Yes – Kate!)
I heard this morning that the current advice is that if you can drive
to your destination in less than 8 hours, then drive.

It’s amazing how important these people are for airplane travel –
even though we never see or hear from them.
They just observe everything that’s going on,
keep the flow of information going,
and make sure everyone is on the same page
from their perch in the control tower.

If the control tower goes down, what happens to the plans? Chaos and confusion.

Well, if you remember back to prior weeks of this series,
we’ve been noticing through Genesis 1-11 all the ways that humanity
tries to keep chaos and confusion away
by ordering creation apart from God.

In today’s passage they decide to build ... a control tower.
A control tower that reaches to the heavens,
to make a name for themselves that will be remembered
for generations to come,
and establish a world of predictability and abundance.

Make a name for ourselves.
Humanity always has and always will be
drawn to the temptation of making a name for ourselves.

It’s the longing of Marlon Brando’s character in *On the Waterfront*,
which I ... have never seen.
But I do know the famous line he delivered,
“You don’t understand! I coulda had *class*, I coulda been a contender,
I coulda been *somebody*.”
He wanted to make a name for himself.

It's the goal of every influencer who comes across our social media feeds,
it's the hope of every politician who puts their name on a ballot.
I want to make a name for myself.
In the ancient world, the goal wasn't so much individual fame.
What they wanted most was to establish
the honor and greatness of their people, their group, their lineage.

But how? How can a group of people make a name for themselves?
By demonstrating lasting control over the chaos of the world
in a way that is undeniable and unforgettable.

That goal is at the heart of this powerful gem of a story.

Though it is told in only 9 verses, it sticks with you for a lifetime.
The first four deal with humanity's words and humanity's actions.
The next four reveal Yahweh's words and Yahweh's actions.
The final verse concludes the tale with a brief summary.

This is the culminating scene of Genesis 1-11,
the capstone of this archetypal prologue that sets the stage
for the Abraham and Sarah story which will guide, really,
the rest of Scripture.

We learn in v. 1 that at that time the whole world had one language in common.
What a beautiful gift! No translation needed, no miscommunication.
Think of what could be accomplished?

This is somewhat surprising, though,
since the genealogy of the previous chapter made clear
that each son of Noah "spread out into their territories
by their clans within their nations, each with its own *language*."

How can all the nations named in chapter 10 have their own language,
and then in chapter 11 everyone has one common speech?

The explanation offered by John Walton, who I studied with this past summer,
is that the tower of Babel story in chapter 11 uses the term "language"
as a euphemism for mindset, goal, or political purpose.

From this way of reading it, the whole world (after the great flood)
had a common goal which they were united around.

I'm not totally convinced of this interpretation, but it's an interesting consideration.

Whether united by one language or one purpose,
as these language-sharing people head east, toward what would become
Babylonian and later Persian lands,
they decide to embark on an ambitious project:
build a city with a tower that *reaches to the heavens*.

The literal phrase used here is “Head in the Heavens.”

This was an ancient term for a tower
found in texts from other civilizations as well,
like we use the term “sky scraper.”

A tower that reaches to the heavens is a tower that puts you in touch with
the heavens, that places those at the top of the tower
in the position of God.

Walter Bruggemann says the “tower may have referred originally
to a Babylonian ziggurat, a temple-tower presented
as an imperial embodiment of pride and self-sufficiency.”

SLIDE:



Tall towers and big names have long been sources of attraction for humanity.

In the 21st Century, not much has changed.

But what's the problem with it?

If you can build it and it makes you happy,
why not go ahead and build it?

Well, think back to the creation story in Genesis chapter 1.

While God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.

In Gen. 1:28 God desired for humanity to spread themselves abroad,
and to cultivate the garden God had placed them in.

Here in Gen. 11 we have people gathering together to build a city (not a garden)
and saying, “let’s make name for ourselves
and *not* be scattered over the earth.”

So they are pitching an alternative purpose and vocation
for humanity that overturns the will of God.

The concern of humanity in these opening verses
is really about self-promotion and control.

Now, you might be wondering
how building this tower would help them control anything?

Dr. John Walton did his Ph.D. dissertation on the Tower of Babel.

He shared with us *how* a ziggurat works.

The ziggurat required an immense infusion of resources to build –
it was truly a collective effort.

Down at the bottom would be a place for sacrifices to be made
in the name of the god that a people wanted to entice to be in their service.

The top of the ziggurat would have a single room
which served as a dwelling place for the god you made sacrifice to.

The god would come down to your tower
and be fed by the sacrifices made in the gods name.

In exchange, the god would bless your crops and your herds, your army,
whatever it is that this particular god was known for.

So it was a reciprocal relationship in which
people scratch the gods back, and the god will scratch theirs –
in fact, the god would be indebted to them
and obligated to bring order to their world
while holding chaos at bay.

In other words, a ziggurat was a control tower: a way of ordering creation
that kept people in charge of the action.

The tower building project with extra strong bricks (double baked!)
is a technological achievement of people united in a common language
that diminishes God’s intentions
for humanity and empowers a completely hopeless dream
of humanity controlling its own destiny.

Theologian and author Skye Jethani said something in an interview that I found really illuminating on this point:

“Why does Scripture prohibit astrology, witchcraft, divination, sorcery? It’s because in the ancient world, these practices were employed to try to control deities – and to try to control God. How do I get the outcome I want, guaranteed? How do I know what’s gonna happen in the future? It’s all predicated on fear and control. And the God of Israel comes along and says, ‘For my people, these practices are prohibited because I am not someone you can control (number one), and number two, I have proven my love for you and I’m inviting you to trust me rather than try to control me.’”

That is what The Tower of Babel is about!

The big problem wasn’t that people had a common language,
the problem was that they wanted to make their own name great
by control God to fit into their purposes.

Can Christians fall into this problem?

Absolutely. We want to make a name for ourselves by being a church
of huge numerical growth – just follow these strategies.

Or we might be tempted to think that if we follow a formula,

God will protect us. If we give enough money
and help out at church and serve our neighbors and pray every day,
then God will be obligated to keep us from disaster.

That’s not a life of faith – that’s building a ziggurat.

We don’t get to control God.

God will never owe us one.

And we cannot be guaranteed that chaos will be held at bay.

At a bigger level, there’s the temptation that if we make our country
a Christian country, then God will uniquely bless us, and we will prosper.

Eliminate all those who don’t fit a particular definition of

American Christianity, so that we can again

take control, be in charge, and sing together

in one language “God bless America!”

That’s not the life of faith.

That’s building a ziggurat.

But there’s another area of modern life that the Tower of Babel story
brings to mind for me.

We really have developed one powerful language
to unite every person around the world. It's called HTML –
hypertext mark-up language.
It is a common digital language that powers the internet.
The astonishing reach and near limitless vision of internet
is a virtual tower so tall that it makes the tower of Babel feel bashful
and insignificant by comparison.
We've built it. And we're united by it.
And now with the rise of Artificial Intelligence,
it's got the potential to solve all our problems.
But in order to get there – we have to spend,
according to Open AI CEO Sam Altman,
trillions of dollars building up more
energy for the project.

AI data centers are going up everywhere at massive scale.

Journalist Molly Taft wrote in an article for Wired,
“The International Energy Agency released a report finding that data centers
made up 1.5 percent of global energy use in 2024—
around 415 terrawatt-hours, a little less than
the yearly energy demand of Saudi Arabia.”

But that's just getting started.

The demand for energy to run datacenters to provide world-changing AI
that can do all of our work and solve all of our problems
is absurdly high.

The “big names” of the AI world imagine that in the near future,
the vast majority of our energy output will go toward what they call
“increasing compute.”

Of course all this energy production will negatively impact climate change,
and the fallout from these datacenters will predominately be shouldered
by the poor, by minorities, by developing nations.

But does AI work? Sometimes! But not all that reliably at this point.

Will AI make companies more money?

Maybe, but as of yet, almost nobody has figured out how.

Even so, 90% of the S&P 500 growth this year has been due to AI investment.

I want to read a quote from journalist Charlie Werzell's article for *the Atlantic*
about the problem we may face if AI is just “good enough.”

Good enough has been keeping me up at night. Because good enough would likely mean that not enough people recognize what's really being built—and what's being sacrificed—until it's too late.

What if the real doomer scenario is that we pollute the internet and the planet, reorient our economy and leverage ourselves, outsource big chunks of our minds, realign our geopolitics and culture, and fight endlessly over a technology that never comes close to delivering on its grandest promises? What if we spend so much time waiting and arguing that we fail to marshal our energy toward addressing the problems that exist here and now? That would be a tragedy—the product of a mass delusion.

Charlie Warzel, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2025/08/ai-mass-delusion-event/683909/>

Think about the parallels between the Tower of Babel and AI here:

We are told by our great industrial leaders, politicians, and oligarchs
that we must invest all our treasure and reorient our society
into developing this massive technological achievement.
If we do that, then we will have in our control an artificial super intelligence
which surpasses the collective capacity of the entire human race
and will lead to unimaginable prosperity and abundance.

Sounds a lot like building a tower and making sacrifices
to get a god in your pocket, doesn't it?
Remember the assessment of Yahweh after going *down* to the tower
which supposedly had its head in the heavens:
**“If they have begun to do this,
then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”**

This is a wake-up call for humanity.
The people of Jesus Christ should not be deceived.
We need to humble ourselves before God.
We need to recognize how limited our ability to control our fate really is.
And we need to warn our neighbors of what is at stake
for our own capabilities, skills, and joy if we were actually to create
a super-mind that could do all our thinking for us.

People of faith do not get to decide what billionaires do with their money,
but we do get to decide if we're going to put our faith in their vision.

We might live in a tower building world,
but we don't have to share in the tower builder's ambitions.

We might be hurtling toward a world where AI renders privacy obsolete
through facial recognition and tracking,
but we don't have to be people who deny others their dignity.

We might not know if the videos we see today
are real or AI fabrications to influence our perception of the world,
but we can be people who point to truth that stands the test of time.

The world is building a control tower and asking us to worship it.

We don't need to do that. If you've been trying to control your fate, you can stop!
God has already given us access to something far greater.

In the second chapter of the book of Acts,
the Holy Spirit arrives in a way that turns the Tower of Babel on its head.

At the end of Gen. 11, people are scattered around the world in confusion.
But in Acts 2, people were gathered from all around the world.
They spoke many different languages,
but when the Holy Spirit arrived,
they each understood the message of the apostles.

While the tower of Babel relies on human effort to control God,
the arrival of the Holy Spirit is God's empowerment of humanity
through the free gift of grace.

While the tower of Babel sought to make the name of humanity great,
the Holy Spirit teaches us to lift up the name of Jesus,
the one who comes from God who is truly sovereign,
a super intelligence who truly holds our lives and the world.

Let us not give in to the temptation to control, to the way of power, the way of fear.
For we have received the Holy Spirit, who unites us through Christ
to the love of God and a way of life that is truly abundant,
and which is in no way artificial.

