

The Lord Came Down

Genesis 10:32-11:9

June 12, 2022

If I just get this opportunity, I'll make a name for myself. If I just get that child into college or settled, I'll keep up with expectations. If we can just get through this month, our marriage might survive. If this election just goes our way, the nation will be set right again. If I just... If I just... If I just...

God's people have long known a thing or two about justs. First, they *just* want a plain place to live. The people settle in Shinar. Never mind that they were supposed to spread abroad over all the earth after the flood. Instead, they sat there. Really, that's what the Hebrew word for settled is: *yashab*. It means "sat." They sat there at Shinar. God wanted them to scatter abroad, so they found a comfortable neighborhood, and they sat there. And then, we can almost hear our ancestors saying, "If we *just* build the tower, this tower that reaches the heavens, we won't have to scatter. We won't have to move again. So, grab the bricks; we've got a plan."

But here's the thing about justs. They're never that simple, are they? Our justs can feel heavy, even insurmountable. Like building a tower into the heavens, these ambitious goals, even if they come with an easy-to-follow five-step plan, are always just out of reach. Or they end up coming with *just* one more thing to do.

And here's why I think they feel both urgent and impossible: I think our justs are how we cope with the precarity of being human, with the daily demands that accompany an accelerating and diversifying world. But what if I told you that those feelings of uncertainty—that cause us to think that maybe just one more thing will fix it—what if those feelings of uncertainty aren't problems to be solved

but portals to God? Because the way I encounter Genesis, uncertainty is not a punishment but a promise—a promise that God will both send and go with us into that uncertain future.

Just prior to this passage, we hear that God intends for the families of Noah to spread abroad, to populate all of the earth. And just after this passage, we hear the call of Abraham and Sarah to *go*, to go to a land God will show them. He doesn't give them a GPS or an address. He says, "Go. I will show you." And there *God* will make "their name great, *so that* they can be a blessing to all the families of the earth." Abraham and Sarah are living into an unknown future when they go, because to leave one's family and home is to venture into the unknown. To spread out, rather than clustering together, is to move toward uncertainty. It is to unfasten oneself from the familiar and be fastened to a God who goes with us.

No wonder the people in today's story wanted to stack bricks rather than setting out. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. They want to make more predictable arrangements than being dispersed across all the earth. And they have the tools available to them to *just* try a different strategy.

This story is an origin account of the ancient city of Babylon, where they stacked a lot of bricks and built cities and towers. They built Ziggurats in an effort to connect heaven to earth. But this tower... We hear it didn't quite make it to heaven; God had to go down to see it. The text states that directly. "The Lord came down to see what the mortals had built." And God did, because that's who God is. When we just try to do it on our own, our own way, God keeps coming toward us and persists in sending us out yet again.

So, God scatters them again, confusing their languages this time so they'll stay scattered. Because God is concerned with our efforts to divest from God's vision and invest our time and energy into attempts to obtain salvation on our own. So, God descends to us. Amidst our constant efforts to avoid the uncertainty of these lives with complex distractions, numbing, or self-salvation projects, God keeps coming toward us. Keeps reminding us that we can't build our way up to God, that we can't be justified by our own actions, that we can't run from uncertainty without running into God.

It usually begins innocently enough. We may think we're just fixing up our lives... a DIY project here, some bricklaying there. Before we know it, we've made a mess of things and worn ourselves out trying to avoid the uncertainty that comes with following the call of God.

I think about the time my brother, at age 5, came to get my mom, insisting she look at his art. My mother came down the stairs to discover my brother's first large art installation, to be called: food coloring on a white living room furniture set.

My brother, doe-eyed and so pleased with himself: "Look, Mom, look!"

My mother: "Oh, child. What have you done?"

We don't need to build art installations during naptime nor climb out of the uncertainty. All of that sounds like a lot of work. A lot of unnecessary work. We merely need to cling to Christ, who comes toward us in the uncertainty, and stay tethered to the community with whom we share this call. This is what the Trinity is all about—God is a God of relationship. The Father, Son, and Spirit are in relationship, and they call us to work collaboratively with them as well.

This is what Abraham and Sarah did. This is what the Apostles did after that fateful day of Pentecost. They went where the Triune God sent them. They were scattered. They shared the good news to

the ends of the earth. And rather than trying to justify themselves, they relied on the Spirit of their Resurrected Lord to be their power and their peace in every uncertainty that they encountered. And, church, we can do this, too. We must do this, too.

Now, my work is primarily with folks in their twenties and thirties, so roughly my age cohort with a decade on each side—the age bracket sociologists call "young adults." It currently straddles two different generations. And I'll tell you, we are poked and prodded quite a bit. If you want to see a Tower of Babel, I encourage you to Google "church + young adults." Under "people also ask," you will find such things as: "What attracts young adults to church?" "What are millennials looking for in church?" And then several advertisements for the churches of a few televangelists who shall not be named.

Don't get me wrong. I read the research, and I glean the wisdom. There is much holy work done there. But here are three conclusions that I've come to when I hold these studies up next to Genesis 11 and the experience that we are having here as a church:

1. God will have God's way with us—all of us, no matter our age. And it is God's church.
2. Building impressive plans and strategies will never substitute for the ministry God is sending us to do out there. With one another, for our neighbor, collaborating with all God's people, treasuring our differences as gifts, and equipping for the work of ministry.
3. We will wear ourselves out, and the people out, if we don't just go already.

I have seen these truths come to life through the ministry that God is doing through us. A young man unpacking the faith he inherited and now answering the call as God sends him in service. Young people, not raised in the church, and now hungry for God, diving into scripture, study, and service—leading the way for us to offer a more faithful witness in our city and world. These aren't towers of our own building;

these are the stories of God's faithfulness. These are moments in time where the Triune God came down to us, and we didn't get distracted. We met the moment, we met the person, we stepped into the mission together. Moments where we divested our time and energy into attempts to obtain salvation on our own and instead invested in God's greater vision for each of our lives and our collective life together. *Because we know that we can't go where God is calling if we're weighed down trying to will God to go where we want.*

I was recently back at my alma mater, Princeton Seminary, for our reunion. Shoulder-to-shoulder with my old classmates, in our old classroom of Stuart 6, I listened to Kate Bowler, the best-selling author and professor of the history of Christianity in America at Duke, as she delivered the keynote address. The room was full of pastors and Christian leaders, so she spoke to us about our temptation to try and climb our way out of the challenges of these last few years. To DIY it. She ended her poignant presentation with a story from her recent book:

First time hikers of the Appalachian Trail often overpack. As they set out, they bring with them an extra pan, maybe an extra blanket, a few cliff bars, just in case.¹

So, their pack is heavy to begin, and it just gets heavier as they go. So, when they arrive at the first camp to overnight, more experienced hikers will ask them a simple question. "Is there anything you can set down?"

And I'll ask you the same thing: Is there anything you can set down? Anything you don't need to keep carrying? Any "If I just..." that doesn't need to happen today? That doesn't need to have all of your heart? That might actually be holding you back from encountering the God who is coming down to you? The God who wants us to pause our building projects

just long enough to embark on that beautiful and important work that lies ahead?

Our world—with its rampant requests for our attention or outrage and its caustic calls to be better, build bigger, beat one another out—it not only asks more than the gospel requires of us, but it also calls us to compete when we ought to collaborate. And it acts as a sedative, nullifying the growl of our appetite for God.

And isn't that growl, those hunger pangs, the unruly and elegant gift of our faith? We long for God, and God hears us. God sees our striving and comes down to us! This is the story of Jesus Christ. That's what it's all about. He knows the precarity and uncertainty that comes with being human. And he does not call us to build towers out of this world—as if resurrection is merely a rocket ship—but he enters the tombs of this world to redeem and rebirth our very lives, our very church. So, what if we stop building just long enough to let him? What if we throw ourselves not into the next project, but upon the mercy of God who justifies us in the midst of our mess and then sends us yet again to participate in God's mission to reach the whole world.

What if you *just* set something down so you can go where God is calling? Amen.

¹ Bowler, Kate. "The Perfectibility Paradigm." Edwin H. Rian Alumni Lectureship, 24 May 2022, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ. Keynote.