From Babel to Bethel
Genesis 11:1-9, **28:10-22**

The American Film Institute has a list of the top 100 quotes from movies.

- #5 *"Here's looking at you, kid."*
- 15: *"E. T., phone home."*
- 28: *"Play it again, Sam."*
- #44: *"I see dead people."*
- #65 *"Elementary, my dear Watson."*
- And #1: *"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a…"*

[Well, I'll just let you finish that one…]

But lately I've been thinking a lot about Number 11, which features Strother Martin in the role of a brutal chain gang boss in *Cool Hand Luke:*

"What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Long ago, I learned just enough French to be able to embarrass myself in France or Quebec or Haiti. While I was in graduate school, I spent two summers at the Ponderosa Family Campground in Myrtle Beach, SC. Nice work if you can get it! They actually paid me to be *a kind of religious beach bum*—preaching three times each week, helping campers who got in trouble or had to deal with bad news from back home, organizing lots of volleyball games and sandcastle building contests. And—oh, yes—we played lots of Bingo…

Some of my happiest memories involve the French Canadians, the "Québécois," who come to Myrtle Beach each summer looking for warm water to swim in. I found them to be kind, sensitive, friendly—a with an amazing sense of humor. I spoke enough French to be able to communicate with them a little, and they seemed to appreciate that.

Now the Québécois enjoy playing chess, and they are very good at it. My chess skills aren't much better than my French, but they begged me to play, and I did—even though I knew I couldn't offer them any serious competition. But finally—out of pity, I think—one of them threw away his queen and one of his rooks and let me win… When I realized that I had him checkmated, I threw up my hands in triumph and tried to say, in French, *"I'm the grand champion"*: *Je suis le*

grand champion! But I my tongue got all tied up, and I blurted out *Je suis le grand champinion!* —which means, *"I'm the big mushroom!"*

Something got lost in the translation…

"What we've got here is failure to communicate."

Sometimes I can't help suspecting that this is God's verdict over our personal and social lives, over our politics, our religion, our relationships, our history: *"What we've got here is failure to communicate."*

Language is essential to what makes us human…but we just don't speak the same language, do we? We are made for communion, but we don't know how to communicate—not with God or with those who are dearest to us—not even with our friends, much less our enemies.

- **Republicans and Democrats** talk past each other.
- **Parents and children** can't understand each other.
- When **Baptists and Episcopalians** try to communicate, it's as if they are speaking (at least!) two different languages.

Genesis 11 describes a moment when the people of the world *were* united, not only by a common language but also by a shared purpose. But what united them was a determination to take charge of their world, on their own terms—without any concern for how God might be involved in all that. They felt sure that they could fend for themselves—that they could resolve the fundamental issues of life *on their own.* So they set out to make their mark on history—to make a name for themselves—by building a tower that would reach all the way into heaven itself.

The word, BABEL, comes from an Assyrian name, *Bab-ilu*, meaning the "Gate of God," and the builders of the Tower were sure they could open God's gate all by themselves. But how did that turn out for them?

For all their ingenuity, for all their cleverness and ambition, the result was a human catastrophe: they were trying to build their own world on a godless foundation, and God saw that the result was bound to be destructive and demonic. So God put an end to their project by confusing their language, which set the stage for all the failures to communicate that have plagued us ever since, from Babel to Fayetteville.

We're really not all that different from the builders of Babel, are we? We're fascinated by the hope that our learning, our science, our technology will at last make us self-sufficient. Don't we all believe, somewhere deep in our hearts, that sooner or later the scientists will resolve the basic issues of life? Why, if we can just build a computer that's big enough and fast enough and smart enough, we'll create artificial intelligence and organs and limbs, and then we'll abolish death. We'll gain immortality on our own, won't we?

The story of the Tower is God's own warning that our pretense of self-sufficiency is not just arrogance but a fatal delusion.

We so want to be in control, and we think that if we just try hard enough, we can make that happen. That's why we're always shocked and disappointed when a hurricane or an earthquake comes along with a rude reminder of how laughable it is to think that we're in control of the world or of our own lives. We're so sure we can fix what's wrong with our world *on our own terms, by our own cleverness.* How's that working out for us?

You and I are products of a society that worships at the altar of self-help, self-reliance, personal initiative, individual responsibility. Maybe we don't come right out and say it, but we try to live by the creed of the poet who said, *I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.* We can build a city. We can build a tower—or, even better, we can send a satellite to send us back cool pictures from the moons of Saturn. We've got this thing covered, right?

Meanwhile, back home, we still don't know how to talk to each other.

We all hope to have our 15 seconds of fame, just like the builders of the Tower, who were trying to make a name for themselves. Deep within, they had to know how small and insignificant they were, and that was for them—as it is for us—a terrifying thought. It had to arouse deep feelings of anxiety, which they thought they could overcome by making deep footsteps in the sands of time, etching their achievements into the minds and memories of the human family for all time to come. So they said, "Come, let us build *ourselves* a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that *we* may *make a name for ourselves*" (vs. 4). The Psalmist said, "Let them praise the name of the Lord, for *his name alone is exalted"* (Psalm 148.13), but the builders of the Tower wanted to exalt their own name. "Let *us* build *ourselves* a city," they cried, forgetting that *"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain"* (Psalm 127.1). How did that all work out for them?

Now shift your attention from Babel to Bethel—from the Tower to the Ladder. For all his faults, you've got to say this, at least, about Jacob: he suffers no illusions about his own self-sufficiency. His world is collapsing all around him, and he knows it. He has tricked his aging father and stolen his brother's inheritance; now his brother is determined to kill him. In the midst of this moral meltdown, Jacob knows all about his own weakness and vulnerability. His life has turned down a dead-end road, and the one thing he knows for sure is that *he's not in control of anything.* Jacob is at the end of his rope, facing a crisis that he knows he can't work his way out of—but that's precisely where God encounters him in a moment that will change his life, and the life of the world, forever.

Jacob's story begins in Genesis 25, but the first time we hear him making any reference to God is in chapter 28, vs. 16. Jacob is fast asleep when he sees a ladder connecting heaven and earth, and hears God speaking to him. When he wakes up, he doesn't say, *"Wow! I've just had a religious experience!"* The first sentence out of his mouth has as its subject not Jacob but *God: "Surely the Lord is in this place!"* At that moment, his life begins to be transformed. He says, *"God is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!" This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."* This—not Bab-Ilu, not Babel—is my point of contact with the divine.

Jacob learned something that night that the Tower-builders would never know. From that moment onward, Jacob's connection with God is real and permanent, and he becomes a vehicle of God's promise to bless not just the firstborn of Isaac's family but all the families of the earth.

There are really only two ways of bridging the gap between heaven and earth—two ways of making contact with God.

One is the way of the Tower—**from the bottom up.** It's our project. It's about what we can do to put things right for ourselves. It's about building our own religious tower, one brick at a time: we'll get God to love us by all the good things we do—by donations to the Church, by faithful participation in bible study groups, by gifts to our favorite charities and televangelists. We're building a tower that bears witness to our virtue, our success, our achievements—and we think God will be impressed by all that, so everything will be o.k. with us, both for this world and the next. But tower-building always ends, as it did at Babel, in confusion, misunderstanding, and collapse.

The other way is the way of the Ladder—**from the top down.** When God speaks to Jacob at Bethel, the promise he makes is unconditional, with no ifs-ands-buts-or-maybes. When Jacob offers to do something to please God in exchange, God just ignores him. What Jacob promises—or does or doesn't do—MAKES NO DIFFERENCE! *It's God's project, after all, not Jacob's.* The renewal of our lives turns out to be all about what God wants to do for us that we could never do for ourselves. It's not a tower we build; it's a ladder God uses to restore his connection to us at just the moment when we would least expect anything of the sort to happen. It's all about a God who goes on seeking us when we're on the run, and it always ends in a promise that God is with us and for us and working out a future more glorious than we could have dared to imagine or hope for, much less achieve for ourselves. It's not about what we have done to set things right. It's about what God has done to fulfill his promise of a Savior in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed.

To God be the glory: great things he hath done.

Over this past week, as I pondered Babel and Bethel, I couldn't help thinking about a dear lady in my childhood who introduced me and many others to Jesus. Katie Campbell was a godly woman of profound faith and deep wisdom. "Sister Katie," as we called her, gave voice to a powerful witness about the difference that Jesus makes in those who come to him by faith. And when something happened to make it unmistakably clear that God was moving in the life of someone in our little church, Sister Katie could be heard to exclaim, *"Now ain't that just like God?!"*

The history of salvation—the theme of our song—is from beginning to end a story that's not about what we can and must do for ourselves. The subject of the sentence is not I or we or me or us: the subject of the sentence is *God.* It's about *GRACE*—what God has done, and is doing, and will keep on doing for us that we could never do for ourselves. And if you ever really get the point, I suspect that you too will find yourself crying out, *"Now ain't that just like God?!"*

Thanks be to God. Hallelujah. Amen.