

Empire Building  
July 16, 2017  
Dr. Seuss Book – Yertle the Turtle  
Genesis 11:1-11

*The Tower of Babel*

**11** Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east,<sup>[a]</sup> they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” <sup>5</sup> The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused<sup>[b]</sup> the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

It’s just a short little story about a tower...a curiosity really. It is easy to miss. It is tucked between two genealogies and follows on the heels of the story of Noah. God makes the covenant with Noah and then we read about the descendants of Noah and how they spread out on the earth. In pops nine verses describing the fall of a great tower and the scattering of people, and on goes a different genealogy that takes us to Abram. There are some people who say it is tucked in there to explain how we got different languages and cultures – and that’s all. But that argument doesn’t really work for me given the people are already scattered with different languages before the story begins.

It does make one wonder, doesn’t it, why the editors of this great book of Genesis, felt the need to insert this story before God chose Abram to give birth to a nation – a nation with a calling to be a blessing to the world. Perhaps it is a cautionary tale about the human impulse to build empires, which do not bless all people. These towers of power and towers of terror – these soul crushing empires are a far cry from the communities of love and justice God calls us to create.

Did you hear the part about bricks in this story? Bricks connect this story with slavery under Pharaoh in another story about the crushing oppression of empire. Empires are built on the backs cheap labor and slavery. The book of Exodus opens with God hearing the cries of the oppressed.

The scholars of Oxford Biblical studies say the story of the tower of Babel was most likely written during the exile and it is clearly a critique of the Babylonian empire.<sup>1</sup> It was the Babylonians that came in and finished off Judah and destroyed Solomon’s temple. It was the Babylonians who turned God’s people into refugees in a foreign land. In Babylon, Judean exiles got a first-hand look at the tower at the center of the empire’s capital city. According to Oxford this tower had a name I cannot pronounce but means “Tower of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth,” dedicated to the god Marduk. It had “seven stair-like terraces, was 299 feet high and its square ground floor was 299 by 299 feet wide. It was first constructed by the Sumerians, but fell into disrepair. Around 610 BCE a king took a stab at rebuilding it but didn’t get it done. King Nebuchadnezzar came along and mobilized workers from all the corners of the empire but never got completed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.ptstulsa.idm.oclc.org/article/opr/t998/e4?\\_hi=0&\\_pos=2](http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.ptstulsa.idm.oclc.org/article/opr/t998/e4?_hi=0&_pos=2)

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Biblical Studies online “Babel”

Last Sunday I had the privilege of hearing the Reverend William Barber preach at Central Christian Church in Indianapolis. Some people liken him to the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Reverend Barber refreshed my memory on King Nebuchadnezzar by preaching on the story of the fiery furnace. The story is told in the Book of Daniel that King Nebuchadnezzar wanted the absolute allegiance and loyalty of everyone in his empire – bow down or be killed. Bow down to the empire or be crushed by it. Shadrach, Meshack and Abendigo stood their ground and refused to bow down. They stood their ground and refused to bow down. Reverend Barber preached a mighty word reminding us that this impulse to build towers of power and terror is with us still. This impulse to build empires on the backs of the poor and the vulnerable is alive and well. This impulse to build empires with leaders that refuse to listen to those on the bottom and deny basic human rights is right here under our noses. The rulers of this earth keep trying to finish that tower. They just can't get it high enough to satisfy their egos. Reverend Barber called for God's people to stand their ground and not bow down, because God has different plans, plans that don't include towers and fortresses, plans that don't include slavery and oppression, plans that don't include poverty and inequality. God has another set of plans.

In eleven verses, the story of the tower of Babel teaches a lesson that every generation learns the hard way – an empire built on the backs of the most vulnerable is destined for destruction by the very values that created it. God builds bridges, not towers.

Generations later Mary, pregnant with Jesus, sings:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

God lifts up the lowly. God fills the hungry with good things. God looks with favor upon the lowly. Empires and their power-hungry leaders do not.

The story of the tower of Babel is a cautionary tale and a reminder that God's people are not in the business of building empires. God's people are called to build a kingdom of love and justice – for all.

Dr. Seuss makes it so simple to understand. Yertle's desire for power is insatiable. He wants to be greater, go higher, and make everything his own. His royal voice thunders and he celebrates his marvelous self. He silences, he demands, he enslaves, he threatens. Mack, the lowest of the low, is just a part of his throne. Meanwhile, those on the bottom have no food, no rest, and no rights.

Mack didn't want to be king – he just wanted to be free.

Seuss' story ends with humor and poetic justice. We get to see King Yertle plummet into the mud and it is deeply satisfying. All it took was the movement caused by one little burp. A plain little thing toppled the king.

Seuss was writing about Hitler and against totalitarianism. The authors of the Tower of Babel were writing about tyrants of every age and against totalitarianism. The goal of God's people was never to have power over others...the goal of God's people is liberty and justice for all God's children. And what it takes to make that happen is a little movement and a whole lotta burpin'.

God's children are being crushed by the weight oppression and slavery – what we need is a little movement to get things wobbling.

The gains made in civil and human rights can be stripped away if we do not defend them – what we need is a little movement to get things wobbling.

God's children are suffering – what we need is a little movement to get things wobbling .

“Last year, Oxfam said the world's 62 richest billionaires were as wealthy as half the world's population. However, the number has dropped to eight in 2017 because new information shows that poverty in China and India is worse than previously thought, making the bottom 50% even worse off and widening the gap between rich and poor.”<sup>3</sup>

What we need is a movement. What we need to do is stand up and say “yes” to the one who said, “Follow me, I'll show you how to feed people and heal people and love people.” We need to say “yes” to the one who said, “I'll show you greatness!” We need to say “yes” to the one who said, “I'll teach you how to serve and I'll show you how to sacrifice.”

We need God to show us how to topple towers of injustice instead us of propping them up with apathy and cynicism.

Christianity is a movement, a movement of liberty and justice for all, and all means all!...We've just gotten a little comfortable at the rest stops.

Whatever your social location, whatever your gifts, whatever your title, whatever your influence, whatever your gender, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your age, whatever your color, whatever your ability, you are part of a movement for justice and wholeness and love.

It's time to move!

Lots of plain little things can shake, maybe even topple, towers of injustice.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/16/worlds-eight-richest-people-have-same-wealth-as-poorest-50>