

“The Legacy of Cain”
 Sermon for 7 April 2019
 Texts: Gen. 11:1-9

Sandwiched between two narratives of obedience—that of Noah and that of Abram, we find the Tower of Babel account. It is an astounding thing that after the flood, after the elimination of the whole wicked line of Cain in the flood, we find that **as the people migrated east. They found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.** They did not settle there to take up ranching, a more settled form of pastoral life than herding flocks and a way of life more compatible with agriculture (the raising of wheat, barley and other field crops). That would have constituted “subduing, replenishing, developing” the earth more in keeping with the creation mandate to **be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.** (Gen. 2:28 and echoed in Gen. 9:1 and 7). The creation mandate, also known as our cultural mandate, has yet to be fulfilled. In Cain’s case God said, **When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.** (Gen. 4:12). It was an act of defiance, or of rebellion for him to go settle down, and **build a city** (v. 18). The post-flood people, the descendants of Noah, advanced their own agenda when they came to Shinar (Babel, Akkad, Erech, and Calneh—the Mesopotamian region of Babylon). Nor was this the last we hear of this fundamental misstep, when Lot Abraham’s nephew settles into Sodom and Gomorrah—replacing his pastoral life in the fertile Jordan Valley with an urban residence; his rebellion brings danger, destruction, peril and vulnerability.

Houston, with 627 square miles, the eighth most expansive city in the U.S. with a population of 2.4 million, the fourth most populous city in the nation, comes to mind. It is a port city, filled with petrochemical plants and oil companies, has the disadvantage of low elevation and much of it lies with the storm, flood zones of Harris County. The ziggurats of Babylon, being only sixteen stories high, pale in comparison to the high-rises, skyscrapers and towers of Houston. However, as high as Houston’s tallest buildings are—48 completed buildings over 427 feet, God still looks down upon them as both puny and tiny! Despite all the development, the challenge of how to render productive, or bountiful the land is problematic. Green space alone and backyards are insufficient towards that end. In urban places, God can be set aside as a matter indifferent until the weather goes radical and reminds the urban dwellers that they still do live on earth.

I am not saying cities are inherently evil. And I am not concluding that they are rebellion-free zones. I am pointing out that they are contrary to the migratory thrust of divine directives out of Eden, and off the ark! They run counter to the call of Abraham: **Get out of your own country, and from your relatives, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.** (12:1) He was called out, to be called into something different, something new and God-ordained. Note this, unlike Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress, and unlike the call of Samuel, Abram’s call was not solitary; it was not individualistic. It was a family-based move. And Abraham if he erred to the side of generosity, complicated his obedience two ways. First, he sojourned too long perhaps in Haran (settling his father’s estate?) and he may have

brought along too much family. We know that Lot came along, but we don't hear that God fully backed his inclusion.

Here is what God plans for Abraham in the family way:

17 The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 since Abraham will surely become a great and [populous] mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? 19 For I have [lit. known] chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

This is not the picture of an individual believer, fleeing land, home and family for the better life of the city. And, Lot, who separates from the household of Abraham, does not benefit from fatherly guidance (from his uncle) or from family discipline (his own family is wildly dysfunctional—immoral, drunken and lustful).

Still, Abraham packed up and moved, the people of Babel chose to stay in one place, **build a city, and a tower** as a monument, we gather, to themselves.

These reflections on migration, *on the call of God to develop the land*—not, mind you, to fill up our sanctuary cities, huddled and homeless in filthy streets where they congest traffic and contract diseases! What if they are heeding the call of God and are fleeing the cities of wickedness in hope of finding that better country? What an opportunity to heed the call to replenish, refurbish, reconfigure the land—think of the towns and communities that could be developed to settle folks in homes, to find dignified work, useful employment. What if this is God's resettlement plan and what if they bring prosperity to barren places and are not looking to take it from any? If they are shown mercy, and kindness—generosity and wisdom? What if instead of shutting them out, we choose to bless them and build them up? Imagine, we could be friends. Then they might stand between us and many dangers; their good will deflecting the hatred and anger of those who kill, steal, murder and destroy. What if they seek a godly country and so may even deflect us from increasing godlessness? Imagine welcome as a gift, not fended off as an expense. I say, good neighbors make better fences than good fences do because if you have the first, you have no need of the last. It is not as if there isn't land enough and, additionally, so much of ours is idle. With the right skill set, and a vision, they could prosper in idled places, farm live and raise their families and we all could thrive together. That would be great, but what we have right now is not so great.

Back to Shinar. God announces that He would **come down and see**—He will repeat this exercise in the days of Abraham. He comes down to see **the city and the tower**. As the building inspector? As the code enforcement officer? But He is not searching for architectural flaws, engineering errors, so much as for rebellion in their hearts. God is on flood patrol, checking to make sure that pride and rebellion do not overflow their banks and bring destruction—which was the problem in Sodom and Gomorrah that required a catastrophic remedy (**fire from heaven and utter destruction**). Immorality, sin and wickedness will not grow unchecked forever. God will not endure brokenness to go untreated. That would be inconsistent with love.

A city can be built to the glory of God. A country can be run that way as well. We can disavow the legacy of Cain— turn to God, serve the Lord and bless one another. The question I have is why not here, and why not now? There are conversations we need to have, conversations we don't dare not have. Let Jesus into the circle.

Picture Jesus surveying our southern border. What would He see? Families. And sheep without a shepherd, lost sheep and His heart would go out to them. So should ours. We should see their need for a Savior; we should see their importunity as God's opportunity, their neediness and His sufficiency. Jesus did not fear them. He knew what was in them and He knew all the evil they were capable of and proceeded to lay down His life for them. They did not daunt Him, or intimidate Him because He choose to love them. Jesus is their hero. Who will tell them so? If we would catch the Jesus, if we were infected with His compassion, I sense we would see things differently . . . and seeing differently, we might even resort to doing differently.

The question is not how to control them, it is not how to exploit them . . . it is how to love them savingly—not just humanely, not as if they have rights above our own—for we do not even defend the rights of all our own very well. May the Lord have mercy on us all at once.

Amen