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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, September 13, 2009

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

Can We Talk?

Genesis 11:1-9

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God will accomplish incredible things through you. But the emphasis must be on God and his work in and through you. This is the discipleship lesson. It is about God, not you. It is about God, not man.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”¹ The Word asserts that God is the author of life.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’ When the woman saw that the fruit was good for food, she took some and ate it. Then the eyes of both of them [Adam and Eve] were opened and they realized they were naked.”² Creation was recalcitrant and resistant to the purposes of the very one by whom and for whom the world exists. The Word asserts that sin is deadly, but God has a way out of the predicament.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. “So the LORD said [to Noah], ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth. I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. So make yourself an ark.’”³ Man was enamored with immortality. Man was a restless wanderer. There was only one bright spot left on earth. That bright spot was Noah. The Word asserts that there is a way for a new beginning.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living

¹Genesis 1:1-2

²Genesis 3:1; 6-7

³Genesis 6:7; 13-14

creature that was with you.”⁴ The Word asserts that God’s intent for you and me is other than we deserve.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. “The LORD said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.’”⁵ The Word asserts that God will accomplish incredible things through you. But the emphasis must be on God and his work in and through you. It is about God, not you.

“Nimrod, Nimrod, he’s our man. If he can’t do it, no one can.” You remember Nimrod. Genesis 10:8-12 reads, “Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, ‘Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Culneh, in Shinar.” Nimrod was as a descendent of Noah through Ham. He used his strength and smarts to build cities, lots of them. Everybody knew him.

Nimrod was a superb inventor, developing advanced construction techniques. It seems that in the generations after the flood people had been using stone and mortar for their buildings. Now, with Nimrod, they developed a new system with bricks of baked clay and a binding compound out of asphalt, which was found in great quantities just below the surface in that area of Babylon. This is modern day Iran and Iraq, where much oil is found.

Nimrod and the people 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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”⁶ This would be it. This would establish their reputation as master builders, super humans, no matter what else happened. Their wonderful building skill and greatness would be the glue that would hold their human empire together. And Nimrod would be their king. Nimrod, the mighty hunter before God, became known as Nimrod, the mighty builder, who really didn’t need God. He could do it all by

⁴Genesis 9:8-10

⁵Genesis 11:6

⁶Genesis 11:4

himself.

Building the Tower was all the people could think about. Nothing else mattered. Building the Tower was all consuming. And the God who made them, to whom they mattered, watched. A jilted lover. God was left totally out of the equation, not factored into their vaunted formula for success in life. And so, God, being God, unwilling to sit in the shadows and to be crassly shoved to the sidelines, gave a simple wave of his hand and scattered Nimrod and the people like leaves in an autumn wind. “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.”⁷

Nimrod, the mighty warrior, with many cities to his credit and his people, gathered the people together at Babel and built the biggest and best yet. Nimrod became obsessed with his own success, just like the team mate, who happens to make a few good fakes and rushes up the middle breaking tackle after tackle and scoring the winning touchdown. Just like the running back who suddenly thinks he’s the whole team, Nimrod came to believe that he was the greatest builder of all time. Nimrod is the first example of this narrow and blind self-interest.

Nimrod was blinded by his thoughts of personal greatness. He forgot all about the One who is truly great, the One who demands an accounting from all his subjects, the one who alone is to be bowed down to and worshipped on account of his magnificence. He and the people forgot about God Almighty. John Calvin writes, “Unless the blessing of God be present, from which alone we may expect a prosperous issue, all that we attempt will necessarily perish.”⁸

What was Nimrod’s problem? It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in God. He did. Nimrod’s problem was that he couldn’t figure out where to place God in life. So, like some consultant’s report which is a square peg in the government’s round hole, Nimrod shelved the idea. Nimrod figured he could reach for his faith if an occasion ever arose where God was needed. But you and I both know better. I mean, how

⁷Genesis 11:7-8

⁸John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by the Rev. John King (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 331.

often does the consultant's report come off the shelf once it's placed there?

Nimrod's problem is our problem. We get so focused on the goal, so busy, absorbed and tired that just perhaps, in trying to get there, our Creator gets squeezed out of the picture. It's when the projects, challenges and moments of life swallow up the space that has a reserved sign on it for God.

It can happen in some rather blatant ways. Like when we go full bore and get tired during the week and Sunday becomes a day where all we want to do is kick back with a coffee and the morning paper. Church time, worshipping the Lord time; maybe next week. Right now it's just too much to ask. And in the mornings or evenings, we're just too busy to take time out for a few moments of prayer and scripture reading. Mealtimes, at best, begin to feature a quick, "Amen, pass the grub" rather than a heart-felt "Thank-you" to him from whom all blessings flow. Or when it comes time to buy a house or a new automobile, we reach for the absolute most we can possibly afford. We end up working the extra hours to make the payments, leaving us unable to do any volunteer work for Kingdom causes. Tithing? Don't think so.

Here's a challenge: Take a piece of paper and write on it the three most important things in your life. Then write down three goals you'd really like to see accomplished in the next three years. Recognize something? Each one of us is building a legacy, a monument, a tower of activities and accomplishments by which we will be remembered. This is the question, however. Does our tower have our name in blazing color right across the top? Or does it proudly advertise the name of him who has been lifted up on a cross in order to provide eternal life, new life and abundant life?

Judgment came again. Nimrod and the people were judged. Prior to judgment, all humanity had one language and one vocabulary. This fact alone provided strength in unity. The text implies that the people had moved from parts unknown to a large plain in Babylon. The people did not settle down as innocent and unsophisticated. Rather, they sought fame. They built a tower which was an architectural monument. The tower arose as a sign of their will to fame.

God saw the possibilities and temptations which faced the people as an outgrowth of their

architectural feat. He saw a humanity that could think only of its own well being and fame. Because of the people's misplaced focus, God punished them by breaking up their unity as symbolized through their common language and vocabulary. God confused their language. The one group became many.

The building of such a tower was offensive to God, because it demonstrated independence from as opposed to dependence upon Him. As man strove for fame that pursuit set them against God. Babylon, the original seat of culture, became the paradigmatic symbol of man's ultimate rebellion against God. The unity man needed could no longer be found in language. It would be found in their common religious faith.

The focused human ingenuity in building the Tower of Babel caused God great concern. Humanity's focus in unity was all about making a name for themselves. Their unity was self-serving. Who was getting the credit? As your pastor, my requested response of you is to examine your life and decide where you place the credit for what is being accomplished in and through you.

Unity is a precarious concept. It cuts both ways. Unity can be motivated by the good and the bad. What are the things that separate you from others? And, when you want unity, what are the common threads that bring you and another together?

We need to assertively pursue the next step in the change in culture here at Eastminster. And the DNA/culture change will take a unifying effort. That is why the current discernment process which is being done by the session is so important. Your next opportunity to participate in the discernment process is tomorrow evening at 7:00pm in Fellowship Hall. As I begin my 38th month with you, I am mindful how far we have come in reorganizing our ministry around the core commitments and our mission statement, *Being and Making Disciples*. The culture is changing at Eastminster. We are moving from a purely institutional understanding of church to one which is missional. The change is gradual and gaining momentum.

There is a sizable roadblock in our way, however. In order for us to be a congregation that is united in a missional understanding of church, then as your pastor I must bring criticism to you in

compassion. There is something broken in all of our lives. What is broken? There is a consumer spirit in the church in general and in our congregation in particular. This consumer spirit, embraced by some and ignored by many, is impeding the spiritual growth of our lives as individuals and a congregation. It is impeding our move from being an institutional church to one that is missional. It is easy to become acculturated into societal norms and patterns. One of those norms and patterns is to build ourselves up; to want things on our terms, suiting our preferences. The Holy Spirit does not honor a ministry that is rooted in the unifying theme of self interest and self preferences. In order for the DNA to fully change at Eastminster, we must desire most of all a love for God and the lost. We cannot build a ministry, a monument to ourselves.

We can remain focused on ourselves and our preferences or shift our loyalties to God and his biases. Philip Yancey writes, “Sin tempts us to choose the artificial over the real, the fleeting pleasure over the lasting good. We follow our longings, only to find them disordered and unquenchable.”⁹ The behavior which is rooted in self aggrandizement is sin. Such behavior does not accomplish the will of God. We must repent.

Romans 2:12-16 reminds us that God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ. Matthew 18:15-20 delineates a model for how we are to handle conflict. Both texts demonstrate how unity can be accomplished only in and through Jesus Christ.

God will accomplish incredible things through you; through us. Only with God, united in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit do we see behavior that unifies us in the bond and fellowship of God. God will accomplish incredible things through you. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. Let us pray!

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⁹Philip Yancey, *Rumors Of Another World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 102.