

The Tower
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Genesis 11:1-9
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I hope that you all didn't come this morning, eager to hear me bash on technology for 20 minutes.

Because that's not what is going to happen.

More often than not I see critiques of "technology" turning into picking on millennials—or just young people in general.

You know, the ones glued to their phones.

Who can't possibly live without texting and social media.

Necks and backs hunched from staring at their phone.

Well guess what. I am a millennial. I am one of those young people.

So instead of ragging on technology I am going to talk about something, in my opinion, far more interesting.

This might sound strange, but one of my favorite things to talk about is desire.

What do you want? What do you long for?

What drives you, what motivates you, what pushes you forward?

What gets you out of bed in the morning? (Other than coffee?)

I think of desire like an ache in my heart.

A nostalgia, for something that I can't quite put your finger on.

A home that no longer exists.

A home that never existed.

The Christian theologian Augustine was obsessed with the notion of desire, and I am fascinated by him because of it.

He was the one who said about God,

"You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

James K.A. Smith, author of *You are What You Love* brilliantly connect how our desires and habits, reveal what we worship.

What we worship meaning what we fervently value, what we revere, what we pour our lives into.

Worship is what pulls energy and emotion from us.

We put time, dedication, and discipline into what we worship.

Or who we worship.

And that what we worship reveals what we really, truly love.

Smith talks about how Augustine was really on to something with his idea of the restless human heart.

Augustine believed that love is like gravity.
It pulls us in different directions.
Sometimes in good directions, sometimes in not so helpful directions.
Augustine thought that we will never be satisfied until we realize that in our pursuit of what we “love” is actually the all-encompassing love of our God and Creator.

Our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Smith, the author, built on this.
He says that to be human is to love.
We can't help but have an inner desire for something ultimate. Something complete.
He says we all walk around with this idea in our head of how life should be.
We yearn for the “good life” and anticipate the moment when we feel as if we have made it.
All is well.
But as we go through life the “good life” always seems just around the corner.
We end up frustrated, and the hole in our heart aches.
Something is missing.
Yet we go to bed, get up the next morning, and do this whole life thing again.

Our hearts continue yanking us around, whispering ideas of contentment, visions of well-being.
If only we could just reach it.
Just contain it long enough that it seals all our cracks and fills this never ending well inside of us.

This is why a lot of us end up sitting in church pews.
In worship we get a glimpse of what it might be like to be fully connected with God, to be completely in-step with Jesus.

This is what worship is.
A dance with the divine.
A preview of the Kingdom, a glimpse of the heavens.

But church is not the only place in which we worship.
God is not the only thing that we praise.
There are many many many other things in our life that we devote time, energy, and emotion to.
These are things we worship.

According to Smith, we are what we love, and we are what we worship.
And what you worship, how your desire is embodied, shows the orientation of your heart.

The problem surfaces when we acknowledge that our heads and our hearts are not always in alignment.
Who we think we are isn't exactly who our day-to-day realities reveal that we are.

What we think we love and what we actually love don't always align.
Our actions, our habits, reveal who we really are, not just who we think we are.

This might not seem related to technology or the Tower of Babel, but it actually has everything to do with it.

This story found in Genesis 11 is usually told as a warning against the sin of pride. The people of Babylon thought too highly of themselves. They thought that by building this really, really tall tower then they would be like God. Everyone around them would know them by their grand accomplishment.

But God didn't like being threatened with a humanity bent on pushing boundaries and achieving the unachievable. God wanted these people and everyone else to recognize that he was the most powerful. So God punished their arrogance by confusing their language, and scattering them across the Earth....turning their greatest fear into their reality. Now no one would question who was really in control and the most powerful.

I wonder if there is a different side of the story. Perhaps I am naïve, but I always assume that people really are good and that they really are only trying to do the best they can with what they have.

And I would like to believe in a God that has our best interest at heart. That lives and acts among us in ways that help us flourish and thrive. A God that is constantly transforming suffering into strength, grief into growth, and despair into determination. A God that helps mend brokenness in our relationships and in our world.

That being said I am not necessarily saying that this story isn't about pride, or that God shouldn't be seen as sovereign.

I just wonder if there is more to the story.

And I wonder this for several reasons. First of all the original name for the city was Bab-ilim. Which meant the Gate of God. The tower, the focal point of the city, was viewed as the literal gate from which the people believed that God would descend and congregate with humans. People would take their offerings to the base of the tower, and God could come down and relish in the gifts from the people. This tower was a holy space.

It was the clever word-play of the author of this story that changed the name from Bab-ilim to Babel—a twist on the Hebrew word Balal which means confusion.

A second intriguing detail in this story is that the word “scatter” has connotations of the concept of exile, evoking similarities to how God saved the Hebrews from the oppressive regime of the Egyptians.

This tower, it was the center of their world.

It was the center of their worship.

The focal point of their lives.

And sometimes I think that what we worship, where we worship, and how we worship can kind of bleed together.

We get confused.

Do we worship the God or the place?

Do we worship the God of the Bible or do we worship the Bible itself?

Do we worship in church or do we worship the church?

Do we worship within community or do we worship community?

Do we use technology or do we worship it?

In the book *Living into Focus*, Arthur Boers uses the language of “focal practices”¹ to describe activities that center, balance, focus, and orient one’s life.

He talks about “focal living” as a way of life that helps us identify and perceive the “something more” that people seek.

The Augustinian desire that makes our heart ache.

Boers believes that technology, or the misuse/overuse of technology creates a disembodied, disconnected, and disoriented sort of life.

To try and restore balance, Boers explores the word “focus.”

“The word focus comes from the Latin word for “hearth”—a wood-stove or fireplace...”

Something that people used to use, and some still use, for comfort, warmth, and survival.

Everything in a room was centered around the hearth.

It drew people together.

Think about what our living room furniture is usually centered around now-a-days.

When I went to Oregon for a ministry internship about 4 years ago I stayed with a really great host family.

I got along with them really well, but I noticed that when people got home, they usually scattered to their respective rooms and got on their devices.

I didn’t really want to sit in my room by myself, I wanted to hang out with them, so I ended up going to the rooms of the brothers who were around my age, asking if they wanted to do something fun.

¹ He is actually quoting Albert Borgman

I was like the neighborhood kid who would come over and say, hey can Sally come out to play.

When I was leaving, the host mom told me that I brought their family together that summer.

I didn't know what she meant at first but then I realized that by my insistence that we would hang out and do something fun together actually meant that the family spent more time together and less time in their rooms.

I became a focal point for them that summer.

Boers suggests that to counteract the dizzying vice grip that technology can have on our lives, we find an alternative activity that helps us connect with one another, with ourselves, with nature, or with God.

These activities require our full attention, they require that we be fully present, and they require practice.

The problem with the Babylonians were that they had a mis-placed sense of focus, of worship.

Instead of focusing their attention on God, they build their lives around the tower.

How many hours do you think these people of Babylon worked on this massive tower?

A tower big enough they thought it could touch the heavens.

They were trying to be closer to God, to create a gate to heaven and God said, no no no you have got it all wrong.

You are focusing on the wrong thing.

I am not a tower.

My being is not confined to brick walls.

You do not have to build a tower to reach me

I am not just in the heavens.

I am all around you.

But how was God to show the people that she did not just reside in the sky?

That their worship was misplaced?

God saw that their common language and fancy bricks had assured them that they could do anything.

That the sky is the limit.

They were comfortable, complacent.

What would happen to them if their world was turned upside down?

If they were pushed beyond their comfort zone?

If they were forced to look beyond their familiar city, forced to leave their people.

There is nothing as humbling as trying to learn another language, desperately trying to communicate with someone who does not share your native tongue.

Everything is harder.

Ordering food? Harder.

Using public transportation. Terrifying.

Trying to communicate your feelings, your personality, your sense of humor?

Almost impossible.
I learned all of this when I went on my study abroad term to Peru.
Peru language example.

Perhaps God confused the languages of the Babylonians because God wanted us to seek God's face in those who are not like us.
Because God wanted his people to rely on a strength greater than their own.
To put down their fancy bricks and experience the world around them.

God made it clear, I do not only exist in the heavens.
If you want to be close to me, you will need to put your focus elsewhere.
On anything but this tower.

The Hebrew word for repentance is shuv.
Shuv means to make a 180 degree turn. It's like making a U-turn on the highway. One moment you are going North and then the next you are going South.
Shuv means to replace a bad behavior, thought, or habit with a good one.
It is the act of getting on the right path.

Maybe God was helping the people of Babylon repent.
Change paths.
God took those who were working on the Tower of Babel and re-directed their time, energy, and worship elsewhere.
God changed their focus.

So how does this change our lives?

We go through a lot of our lives on autopilot.
We have schedules, routines, places to be, people to see kids to feed, sports to play, songs to practice, homework to finish.

SO much of our lives is ruled by busy-ness.
WE forget that we do have control over how we live our lives.
The habits that fill our days, the things that we do without realizing them, those things are what shape us.
Our habits become our worship
Our worship reveals what we love
And we are what we love.

So what do we love?

The good news is if we aren't happy with some of our habits we can change them.

I heard on the radio once that there has been real research done on how to—for lack of a better word—“cure” racism.

We live with the unfortunate reality of subconscious judgments.

We have been socialized to attribute certain attributes to certain people.

These judgments are frequently negative and extremely harmful.

They contribute to systemic injustice and oppression.

But these thoughts don't have to rule us.

The report on the radio showed that it is possible to replace negative thoughts with positive ones, or to at least complicate them.

For example:

We see a mother wrangling screaming kids in the grocery store.

We think wow she really has no idea how to discipline her children, her house must be chaotic, good luck when they are teenagers.

And instead of accepting that idea, we challenge it. WE argue with our own brain.

My sister has always been good at this. Someone would fly past us on the highway and my mom would make a comment about crazy drivers who are going to get us killed and my sister would chime in with, “we don't know why they are driving so fast, they could be on their way to the hospital....a mom could be in the car having a baby right now!”

This drove my mom nuts but my sister did have a point.

If we have a negative thought or have the impulse to do an unhelpful action---we first recognize the thought or action and then replace it with something else.

This is also used in overcoming addictions and helping with anger management.

I heard someone say once that our first thought in any given situation is the one that society has ingrained in us and

Our second thought, the one that turns the negative thought on its head, that complicates black and white generalizations, the one that give people the benefit of the doubt...that is who you really are. OR at least the person you are trying to become.

We can do this when technology—or anything else—has become an idol in our lives.

If we feel like our internet usage is problematic, or taking up too much of our time.

We can literally, physically turn away from it.

But we have to replace that activity with something else—or else the very next moment we will be right back in front of the screen.

I never realized how addicted I am to my phone until I left for Peru and I had the constant impulse to check my phone.

To check the time. To see if I had any messages.

To google the definition of something. To look up how far away something was.

It was constant. But for me it was easier to replace that time on my phone with something else because I left my phone all the way in Goshen. I was forced to replace that time with talking with those around me, with being present.

I want to confess that when I write a sermon,

Biggest fear is that people will leave the sanctuary,
thinking ah yeah that was a nice sermon.

And then do nothing differently with their lives.

I am not doing this as a performance.

I truly want us to change our lives to live like Jesus.

To seek God.

If that doesn't happen then I have talked until I was blue in the face, scoured commentaries and wrote this sermon for nothing.

So you might be sitting there thinking,

Ok Mariah so what do you want?

HOW do you want us to change our lives.

I'm not going to give up my phone, my car, or my computer.

Fine. I probably won't either.

To make it simple I want you to leave this place and think about two questions.

These questions are

1. What do I do in life without thinking about it, in autopilot mode. To put it another way, What are my day-to-day habits?
2. And how do my habits reflect my heart's desire and my relationship with God.

These questions might help us dig deeper into our relationship with technology.

They could help us examine what we desire, why we have an ache in our heart that never seems to go away.

They could help us see what we worship, how that forms us.

They can help us see where our hearts desires and our daily actions don't line up.

And who knows. Maybe this sermon won't change anything.

Maybe, just maybe, it will take some sort of Divine scattering.

Maybe it will take God taking us by the hand and turning us in a complete 180.

Maybe it will take God's gentle guidance, turning us away from that which is distracting, unhelpful, and draining,

Instead beckoning us on a path that is life-giving, sustainable, and focused on what truly matters.

I hope that when this happens you will be able to push through the fear and confusion that comes with learning a new language, and be able to hold firm to the knowledge that God is leading the way.

Amen.