

CAGE-RATTLING

Sermon for Pentecost C-Gen 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21, Jn 14:8-17, 25-27

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My mother-in-law, who is diabetic, likes to quote a doctor who told her, “There are two kinds of diabetics: those who cheat on their diets, and those who lie.” I am almost tempted, though I will refrain, from asserting the same about people who read the Bible. In other words, that there are two kinds of people who read the Bible: those who struggle with it, and those who lie.

No, I would not go that far. However, it is a very common thing for people with brains to have trouble with the Bible, or at least parts of it. I might even say that if you’re not troubled by the Bible, you’re maybe not reading it closely enough. The Bible is a troubling book. As a matter of fact, you might say that the Bible is the story of God rattling people’s cages.

The Bible is the story, or rather a collection of stories, of God’s interaction with the world. The Bible says an awful lot about what people are like, and an awful lot about how people experience what God is like. The writers of the Bible knew God. They related their experience with God using the vocabulary available to them. No human, no matter how inspired, can do more than that.

And so we get a story like this morning’s excerpt from Genesis, which attributes the many languages of the world, and the scattering of peoples throughout the world, to the direct action of God. The transcribers of this story could not conceive of anything happening without God’s direct agency. There are obviously many peoples and many tongues in the world, therefore God must have been the cause. This is a reasonable interpretation. However the principle causes problems if taken to extremes.

Using the line of reasoning that nothing in the world happens without God’s agency, one inevitable conclusion is that the evil in the world is also caused by God’s direct agency, which denies our core assertion that God is good. Many people explain this by saying that God sends evil in the world to teach people a lesson. In other words God sends evil to bring about a higher good. This is simplistic and problematic, but also a long story, which I’ll save for another time.

At Babel, suffice to say that people decided they could reach heaven through their own efforts and failed miserably. They came together for a united, but harebrained, purpose, and dispersed in confusion, which is what people do when they are not guided by God. As I’ve said before, the Bible, at its most disturbing, relates how the world *is*, rather than how God intends the world to be.

Now God indeed has a plan for the world. And obviously, we’re not there yet. Humans have an absolute genius for harebrained schemes that block, or at least don’t help, God’s plan. So periodically, as I said at the beginning, God rattles people’s cages. The Bible tells us that that’s how God works.

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Sure, there are cases in the Bible where God apparently tells people, “You’re doing great. Just keep doing exactly what you’re doing and you’re golden.” But that happens in one of a thousand divine encounters in the Bible.

In the Bible, people are called to be faithful, but faithful to God alone. The way that faithfulness is lived out usually involves some adjustments in the life of the faithful person. God comforts. God reassures. But God also rattles people’s cages. A lot.

In Acts we hear a story which parallels the Babel story. People come together. They begin speaking different languages, and they disperse. But this is different. This time, people come together to wait on God rather than to pursue their own predetermined plans. And God arrives in a rush of wind and flame and the gift of language. That rattles cages but good.

One reaction to evidence of cage-rattling is to sneer at it: “They are filled with new wine.” Certainly garbled speech is a frequent sign of drunkenness. Deciding what is inspiration and what is excess calls for discernment, patience, humility and trust. If something is from God, it won’t go away. The cage-rattling will continue, or go away only to recur in another corner of the cage.

There’s another word for cage-rattling where God is concerned. It’s called redemption. On Pentecost God redeems Babel. A variety of languages, once a cause of confusion, becomes a means of re-uniting the world, as the same message of redemption is offered to all.

If redemption is another word for cage-rattling, setting free is a synonym for redemption. God’s plan for people and for the world is for our freedom. God longs to set people free and grieves when they insist on staying in cages of their own device. A certain amount of rattling is necessarily involved when the cage door is opened to let the cage’s occupant go free.

Next time you feel your cage being rattled, before you get annoyed, consider who might be doing the rattling. Consider that, as Jesus implies in the Gospel of John, Christ’s peace is not the world’s peace. We are told to expect the Holy Spirit, and we are shown that the Holy Spirit comes like a cage-rattling wind.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid... to leave the cage when God opens it.