

Blogging toward Sunday

By [Debbie Blue](#)

May 20, 2007

The story of the Tower of Babel seems to have such enduring and diverse cultural resonance that when it shows up in the lectionary, I have a hard time leaving it alone.

The Tower, according to Tarot card readers, is the scariest card in the deck. It means that the foundations of someone's well-constructed world are about to shatter. In the Yu-gi-oh deck, it is a "trap" card. (My son couldn't explain to me what that means, but it seemed worth noting.) According to Ernest Becker, skyscrapers are blatant expressions of humanity's futile attempt to deny death. Franz Kafka has been called the modern heir of the Tower of Babel story because he writes about huge life-sucking systems, including institutions that consume everything and everybody in a futile enterprise from which there is no escape.

This is only ten chapters away from the garden, where God has created life and all is fruitful and multiplying and lush and teeming with species. But in Genesis 11, the people have arrived at a flat plain and there is one language and few words and they say to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and burn them hard and build a big tall hard tower." As a preacher I would juxtapose the garden's loamy fecundity with hard, kiln-baked bricks. In Exodus, after all, the people will become slaves and one of their tasks will be to make bricks. The prophets will lament that the people serve gods of stone, the work of men's hands that neither see, eat, nor smell. The envy and fear in these later stories seems to me deathly when compared to the aliveness in the garden.

The story of the tower is also a contrast to the story that precedes it: Noah's ark. The ark is a womb-like enclosure carved out of the water where Noah will live right up next to "every creeping thing that creeps." Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes about the midrash surrounding the story of Noah. "The core of the ark experience is Noah's relation to the animals he brings with him." He will feed them, smell them, live among them and *learn* from the experience: "Within the intimate but teeming

space of the ark, Noah becomes, in the midrashic view, a new person. . . .The knowing of need is the highest measure of (the) curious tender concern” that makes for redemption (*The Beginning of Desire*). God’s plan for redemption (the cacophony of the ark—weasels, rats, snakes, camels, hissing, snorting, yelling) seems a little messier than what the people on the plain devise.

Harold Bloom suggests imagining that the writer is a woman. “When script becomes Scripture, reading is numbed by taboo and inhibition. Even if imagining an author and calling her J is an arbitrary and personal fiction, something like that imagining is necessary if we are to be stirred out of our numbness (*The Book of J*).” Well, imagine a witty Hebrew prophetess writing this story. She’s given birth to children, created live beings—moving, flexible, blood and flesh and may have nursed them at her breast. What are her thoughts as she observes the men on the plain making bricks and building a tower? Is she saying something about the irony of maleness? Of men who take “brick for stone and slime for mortar” to build their empires (Haliburton, Enron, the military industrial complex)?

In *The City Coat of Arms*, Kafka talks about the tower of Babel—the inescapability, the bloody conflicts and rivalry it caused, how everyone was so deeply involved in the project that no one could leave. He says the legends that came to birth in the tower were all filled with longing for a day when the tower would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist. The tower in Genesis doesn’t end this way. God comes down. God doesn’t stay removed, disgusted by the evil of their DNA. God wanders around among them, not so much like a fist as a mischief maker. God doesn’t like the direction things are going, so God messes it up, confusing their tongues and scattering the people. Another translation for “scatter” is “unbind.” It’s as if God actually *frees* them from their folly.

At Pentecost the Spirit comes down and blows around and everyone starts speaking in different tongues. It’s not a curse—it’s the beginning of the church. And the people feed and need each other. If and when and where the church happens, it’s more like the wind that blows through the tower than it is like the humans laying brick upon brick.