

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
September 17, 2023
Genesis 11:1-9
2nd in a series

“AI: The Room Where It Happens”

Gracious God,

As we gather in this sacred space, we come before you with hearts and minds open to seek wisdom and understanding. We stand at the threshold of knowledge and innovation, reflecting on the marvels of artificial intelligence and the ethical considerations that accompany this powerful tool.

Just as humanity once reached for the heavens in the story of the Tower of Babel, we too are reaching new heights in our understanding of creation and technology. We humbly ask for your guidance and discernment as we navigate the intricate complexities of AI and its impact on our lives, society, and the world.

Grant us the wisdom to wield this newfound knowledge with grace, empathy, and compassion. May we use artificial intelligence for the greater good, striving to build bridges of understanding, collaboration, and unity across diverse cultures and nations.

Help us to remember that true advancement is not in prideful achievement, but in humble service to one another and the world. May our words, actions, and thoughts be inspired by your divine wisdom and lead us towards a future where AI is a force for goodness and a testament to our shared humanity.

In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Last week I began a sermon series on AI, or artificial intelligence. I briefly touched on the fact that the church, or any major religion, for that matter, has been curiously absent from any discussion on how AI is used, or who gets to decide how it is used. In a guest essay written nearly two years ago for the New York Times, Linda Kinstler interviewed religious leaders from various traditions who are fighting to make sure thousands of years of texts and traditions have a place

among the algorithms. But it's not easy to get an invitation to the room where it happens, if you know what I mean. As one religion scholar said, "There are people who spend their lives thinking about culture, religion and ethics. You should bring them into your funding universe if you actually care about an ethics conversation. . . Our government is currently poised to start pouring a bunch of extra money into A.I. ... Why is it that people who understand culture, literature, art and religion are not part of the conversation about what we want to build and how we are going to build it?"

Good question. Speaking of building . . .

In researching the ethics of AI, one story that kept coming up again and again was the story about the Tower of Babel. It's often heard on Pentecost and is a foil for the other story we hear that day, the one from Acts, where God gathers the people who speak in different languages and brings them understanding. In Babel, though, God acts differently; in this story, everyone is of one mind and language, but God disperses the people. Now why would God do that? What's wrong with being of one mind? Goodness, that would solve a lot of today's problems if we could all just agree, wouldn't it? Doesn't so sound bad to me. But, I'm not God.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are referred to as primeval history. This is the history of everything that happened from the beginning of time, from the moment God created the heavens and the earth, as it says. Abraham and all of the other patriarchs haven't even come on the scene. God is still written about in anthropomorphic language. God walks in the Garden of Eden and comes down to the people at Babel to see what they've built. God is also living among other gods. In the Garden of Eden God says, "Adam must not be like us". In chapter 6 there is a very, very odd story about the sons of God procreating with the daughters of men. It's all very primeval, almost mythological, if you will. And in the Babel story God says, "Let us go down". This is a God who seeks advice from a divine council, which is the "us" in the "us" language. It's nothing like the God of Abraham or Moses that we hear and learn about later.

And the one thing all these early stories have in common is that they are essentially about conflicts between humans and God. People want to do one

thing, and God wants them to do another. From the story of the Garden of Eden, to Cain killing Abel, to the sons of God procreating with the daughters of men, to the flood . . . the story of the Tower of Babel is simply the last in line and the straw that broke the camel's back, as it were.

But on the surface, there is really nothing wrong with what the people decide to do. Building towers was common in Babylon, as was the practice of building temples. The temples at that time resembled pyramids, and they provided a means for people to talk to the gods since the bottom was on earth but the top was believed to be in heaven. The priest would serve as a go-between with the people and the gods and would have to go to the temple's top in order to speak to the gods. In many ways it's very similar to what Moses did on Mount Sinai when he climbed the mountain to meet God and receive the 10 Commandments.

So if building tall buildings was common practice, what was the problem?

The problem with building the Tower seems to be the motivation for building it. In verse 3 we hear: "Let us make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Well, up until now, only God grants names. So if the people have the power to grant names, they become a little like God, or little gods, if you will, and God cannot allow that to happen. So God puts a stop to the building campaign and disperses them, because God knows that "making a name for ourselves" is often self-serving rather than uniting.

And herein lies the corollary to AI. The Tower of Babel reveals humanity's ambitious quest for knowledge and power. The people of Babel united to build a towering structure, aiming to reach the heavens. Their collective ambition and pride led them to believe they could achieve anything, even without God.

Likewise, the danger of AI lies in our unchecked ambition and the temptation to rely on our creations more than on our Creator. This is why some people say AI is the new Tower of Babel, a tower we hope will reach the heights of the heavens, and bring us untold knowledge and power. If we can do this, we can do anything.

But AI can be misused in ways that threaten human dignity and spiritual values. Consider the concerns of surveillance and privacy, where AI systems can intrude

into our personal lives and compromise our autonomy. Moreover, the potential for job displacement and economic inequality raises moral questions about justice and compassion.

Going back to the NYT article, Kinstler wrote that while “ethics” had become an industry safe word, no one seemed to agree on what those “ethics” were. “I read through company codes of ethics and values and interviewed newly minted ethics professionals charged with creating and enforcing them,” she wrote. But when she asked one chief ethics officer at a major tech company how her team was determining what kinds of ethics and principles to pursue, she explained that her team had polled employees about the values they hold most dear. “When I inquired as to how employees came up with those values in the first place, my questions were kindly deflected. I was told that detailed analysis would be forthcoming, but I couldn’t help but feel that something was going unsaid,” Kinstler wrote.

When it comes to how AI is used, we don’t have a very good track record. Consider the misinformation in the 2016 presidential election and the cycles that have followed, showing how social media algorithms can be easily exploited. Advances in artificial intelligence are transforming labor, politics, land, language and space. Rising demand for computing power means more lithium mining, more data centers and more carbon emissions; sharper image classification algorithms mean stronger surveillance capabilities — which can lead to intrusions of privacy and false arrests based on faulty face recognition — and a wider variety of military applications. AI influences which streets we walk down, which clothes we buy, which articles we read, who we date and where and how we choose to live. AI, in many ways, is causing us to draw our circles smaller, not larger. So now what we do and who we do with it align nicely with our chosen worldview and we find support for that worldview.

But is this a good thing? If we hold it up to the story of Babel, the answer is no. When the people became of like mind, God scattered them.

The crazy thing about all of this, though, is that AI is, in the words of one tech worker, “. . . just a lot of math. It’s just a lot, a lot of math.” That’s all it is, friends. Math. We’re the ones making it more than it is.

Likewise, the people of Babel took dirt and water and made bricks – which then turned into a plan to make a big tower. But in the beginning it was just bricks – or just math – just another tool to allow people to do things they hadn't been able to do before. Which wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't until the tool fell into the wrong hands, or hands that went unchecked, that it become something it shouldn't. It's not the bricks that were bad, or the technology that is bad. It's the user behind it, or the people deciding how it's used, that is the problem.

This is why being a part of the conversation for how AI is used is of such crucial importance. At its best, AI or any technology advances the world. It makes it better. It makes us all better, healthier, more connected, more educated, with more freedom and knowledge. It transforms lives. And, it gives us cool gadgets like smartphones or games.

At its worst, AI and any other technology is used by people who want to dominate, oppress, or exploit other. It's abused by people who are playing god or worse, think they are god.

This is why it is incumbent upon us to approach AI with a strong ethical foundation. We must seek to align the development and deployment of AI with our faith's core principles. This means advocating for transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI systems. We should demand that AI technologies respect the dignity of every individual and serve the common good, rather than perpetuate discrimination or harm.

Furthermore, we must remember that AI should always be a tool in the service of humanity, not a replacement for human relationships, empathy, or moral discernment. Our faith teaches us the importance of community, compassion, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. AI should never diminish these values but should rather enhance our capacity to live out our faith in a complex world.

And one last thing – but an important note. In addition to pride and arrogance being a motivation for building the tower of Babel, so was fear. Fear that not being of like-mind would somehow be a detriment to the people's well-being. The people wanted to preserve their single culture at all costs.

But God wanted no part of that, so God scattered them and diversified them. But this wasn't a punishment, it was a gift. We have seen throughout history what

happens when people try to create a culture where everyone looks, thinks, acts, believes, loves and lives the same way, and it's not good. In fact, it's dangerous. And dare I say, unfaithful. John Calvin once wrote: "For as soon as mortals, forgetful of themselves, are inflated above measure, it is certain that, like the giants, *they wage war with God.*"

Friends, only God, and God's purpose for the world, is the adequate and true center of unity. Any other attempt at unity will result in confusion or worse. So let us find our unity among the only center that will hold, so that our hearts will be filled with the love of God where there is no room for pettiness, selfishness, or arrogance. Because this is the ethic that is needed; this the value and wisdom that we can bring to the conversation. And it is desperately needed.

Amen.

Sources:

"Can Silicon Valley Find God", Guest essay by Linda Kinstler, July 16, 2021

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Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, commentary for Genesis 11:1-9

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