

Author and church development consultant, Kelly Fryer, tells of a time in seminary when she was listening to an uninteresting lecture on a beautiful day when everyone would rather be outside. The professor knew that nobody was paying attentive, so he closed his notebook and stopped talking. “He wasn’t going to waste one more breath on us,” writes Fryer. But, before leaving the lecture hall, he picked up a piece of chalk, went to the blackboard and drew a huge arrow pointing straight down. He stood back and told the class, “If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian ...,” and with that he left the room. Everyone stayed behind staring at the arrow pointing downward. Fryer admits that the most logical thing she could think was, “He thinks we’re all going to hell.”

The next time the class met, the professor began his lecture by drawing that same arrow on the board. And this time he had everyone’s complete attention. “Here’s what this means,” he told them. “God *always* comes down. God always comes down. There is never *anything* that we can do to turn that arrow around and make our way up to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down, in the bread and in the wine, in the water and in the fellowship of believers. God always comes down.”¹

In today’s Old Testament lesson, God comes down. God comes down to his most beloved creation of all the earth – us. God comes down to those he sent forth from the Garden of Eden, so we wouldn’t take of the tree of life – take life into our own hands (Gen. 3:22-24).

And God comes down to those he saved from The Great Flood, those he blessed, saying to Noah and his sons, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). And God comes down to the descendants of Noah in today’s scripture reading, those who had devised a new purpose for themselves – tower building. Did you notice, as I read the scripture, that the people said to one another, “... Let us make bricks..., let us build ... ourselves a city..., let us make a name for ourselves...” – us, us, us, for ourselves, by ourselves. People, that’s not how God created us – for ourselves. God created us for God’s good purpose, to discern and follow God’s will, to align ourselves with God, over and above all else. Today we start a new sermon series titled “On Purpose” – “Church on Purpose” today, “Travel on Purpose” next week, “Talk on Purpose,” the week after that, and “Live on Purpose” to finish out the series July 12.

¹ Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the “L” Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 25-26.

What is the purpose of church, what is the purpose of our movement through life- our travels-, the purpose of our speech and communication, the purpose of our lives?" That is what we will explore over the next several weeks, beginning today with "Church on Purpose," being a people of God.

The tower builders of Babel had a common purpose. It just wasn't God's purpose. God's purpose was for them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth," not to build towers to the heavens. Tower building for them represented power and position, placing themselves over others. To borrow a phrase from author, Madeleine L'Engle, "Power is the denial of intimacy."

People were not created to get over on each other and certainly not to get over on God. We were created to help each other, to help each other grow and multiply and enjoy God's good creation. And yet, is that the world we have today? No. We have a world of tower builders. We have a world of power mongers and money grubbers, a world of haters taking aim at people different from them, a world of abusers taking advantage of the vulnerable.

That world cannot and will not stand. God will see to that. But how? Well, look at how God handled the tower builders of old. God saw them making a name for themselves apart from God, neglecting and even abandoning their intimacy with God, and God did what he's always done. God uprooted their lives and sent them out into the world with a new mission, a new purpose, to be fruitful and multiply. And truth be told, the tower builders actually uprooted their own lives by trying to ascend to heaven.

How many of you feel like your life has been uprooted in the last three months? We all do. Yet how many of us have taken the time to consider what God is doing in the midst of all this.

Now, I wouldn't suggest that God caused the virus in order to uproot our lives and get us back on track. But I do know that God can and does turn even the most terrible things toward his divine purpose. God's purpose always prevails, even when it's met with natural disasters and evil intent, like the evil of racial prejudice and violence we see today. So, how might God use this moment in history, right now, to turn us toward a more divine purpose?

If we look at those tower builders of old, we see that God came down and confused their language, so that they would not understand one another. Why? Why would God do that? What happens when things fall apart and we're lost in this world?

For the people of God, that's when we look to the Lord for guidance and help. Those tower builders with their confused language would have to learn to get along with one another. And they would have to do this – not based on their own power and purpose – but based on God's purpose, and God's grace and mercy.

Our purpose as the church – as the people of God – is to look to God in all that we do, and to share the blessings, grace and mercy of the Lord with one another, to bring others into relationship with God. That's how we fulfill our calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth as the people of God.

Toward the end of our worship service today, as Paul mentioned, we will sing “For Everyone Born,” verses 1 and 4. In fact, we will sing verse 1 each week during this sermon series, followed by a companion verse that complements that day's sermon.

Verse 4 speaks to today's sermon on the church and its purpose when it says, “For just and unjust, a place at the table; abuser, abused, with need to forgive; in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy; for just and unjust, a new way to live.” Our purpose as the church is to discern and advance a new way to live. That's what it means to “be fruitful” – in our discernment – to “multiply” – as we advance God's purpose – and to “fill the earth” – with new life.

Today is our first Sunday back for in-person worship. I thank God that he has brought us this far, that he has kept us together the past three months despite our physical distancing. I thank God for each and everyone one of you, because God brought you here today with a common, divine purpose, whether you're here in person or joining us on our YouTube channel.

God brought you here today to go forth from this place and share the blessings, grace and mercy of the Lord, share it with others in such a way that they come alongside us to fill the earth with new life.

Do that this week. Reach out to someone and let them know that you are back at church. Let them know what it means to you. Let them know that God loves them.

Bless the life of another person this week by sharing with him or her what it means for you to be a part of a church with purpose. Amen.

GOD GRANT ME THE
Serenity
TO ACCEPT THE THINGS
I CANNOT CHANGE:
Courage
TO CHANGE THE
THINGS I CAN:
AND *Wisdom*
TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen