

“Then Solomon Prayed: ‘O Lord, God of Israel’”

Salado UMC—26 August 2018: 14 Sunday after Pentecost

Preaching Text: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers”

—Oscar Wilde (*An Ideal Husband*, 1893).

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This summer we have attended to several Hebrew scripture stories. A few folks have spoken to me about how they enjoyed getting re-acquainted with this part of the Bible; perhaps others benefited the from a taste of Samuel and Kings. Maybe these texts will have a future in our “VBS for Adults” over the next few summers. In the meantime, we now address our morning’s text from 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43:

[22] Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. [23] He said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, [24] the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. [25] Therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' [26] Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

[27] "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! [28] Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; [29] that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. [30] Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

[41] "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name [42]--for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm--when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, [43] then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built (1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43).

We seldom hear this text preached, but concluding our summer with Israel’s kings, this lesson recalls the chief hopes of Israel’s monarchs. Solomon gathers Israel to install the ark of the covenant in the most holy place in the new temple.

Solomon prays to the Lord and before the people. This is one of the Bible's most extensive prayers. It occurs in the midst of today's scripture/narrative story. In some respects, Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 appears to shadow Solomon's prayer. Solomon's prayer offers an aspect of the "if—then" Deuteronomic theology construct: "There shall never fail you a successor [then] before me to sit on the throne of Israel, *if* only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me." The consequence we note comes in advance of the requested and desired action.

At the prayer's heart, Solomon inserts a rhetorical element when he asks/prays: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Certainly, when Solomon prays about "this house" he uses this phrase to mean a building/edifice. Earlier when King David wanted to construct a new home for the ark, remember that God told David through the prophet Nathan that God was to build David "a house." The Lord, no doubt, meant that God would make of David's lineage a dynasty. This simply meant that a descendant of David would sit on Israel's throne continuously.

The lesson concludes by asking not only that God might hear Israel's prayers in this specifically constructed sacred space, but that "when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house . . . and [you, the Lord] do according to all that the foreigner calls to you . . . that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you." This is a quite universal claim for a 10th century BCE Jew! Even more shocking is that the statement embedded within Solomon's prayer annuls Rev. Bailey Smith's statement at the 1980 Religious Roundtable national affairs briefing in Dallas TX. Smith's exact quote was: "With all due respect to those dear people, my friend, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew" (President of SBC & Pastor of FBC, Dell City, OK).

This week in our neighborhood we experienced a deep connection between place and practice. For goodness sake, one of the most discussed issues in and around the Village has been what is to become of the Mill Creek Golf Course and the attendant fallout thereof. As it turns out, even those who care little or anything about golf recognize what happens as a result of these discussion will have a serious bearing on the future of our beloved little village/community on I-35.

This is yet another piece of evidence that links the deep psychological bond between an activity and a place. Someone told me years ago about a young man in that congregation who proposed marriage to his little honeypie at the Taj Mahal. If you know that shrine's story, then you recognize how romantic the proposal. The Taj Mahal palace is located in Agra, India, built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Whether that young church member knew it or not, that romantic fellow was going to have a lot to live up to!

I have three points. First, whether in the tabernacle, the temple, or the church, God always appears to the faithful in specific places and at particular times. When we say "God is love" we do not mean it in an abstract, generic way. Rather we mean that God loves particular people like Abraham, Sarah, David, Hannah, Solomon, Lydia, Silas, Elizabeth and so many more. When Matthew writes Jesus "left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matthew 4:13) this is specific—particular. Where we or Israel worships specifically is important. The cross is not located just anywhere! 1 Kings 8 reminds us that Israel's specific, particular temple location is at the heart of the community. God's presence is situated at the temple's focal point—at the place of the holy of holies. The exact site is important—not just anywhere will do.

Second, as Solomon asks, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” we answer this in the Christ-event. Not only is Golgotha’s cross (skull) specific, but Jesus died right after 3:00 p.m.—particular. But does God dwell on earth in the tabernacle of Jesus our Christ whom we now call the body of Christ or the church? Yes, in fact, in Revelation 21:3 we read: “See, the home (tabernacle) of God is among mortals. He will dwell (tabernacle) with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” We call this specific Christian doctrine “the Incarnation.”

Third: The Body of Christ is more important than a mere building. Visiting Europe in 2010, I read a sign on a former Copenhagen church: “Museum open from 10 am to 6 pm daily.” In Sweden a fellow passenger reported that their guide said “we are not too religious, but we have beautiful churches that are now museums.” I am glad I was not there, I might have asked, “Well, y’all still die, don’t you?” We, the living faithful, have a hand in helping the buildings meant both to honor God and never devolve into museums.

Perhaps we need to thank God for our buildings. At the same time, however, we remember these buildings only remind us of a God that reveals God’s-self through particular people like us in specific places—like our neighborhoods, places of work, schools, prisons, and our unique friendships. As a shrewd analyst has reminds us: “When we construct a building and make it too important, we change the Christian faith from a radical movement to a static ‘Monument.’ ”

May we keep these three primary ideas in our minds and hearts:

- 1. God always appears to the faithful in specific places and at specific times.**
- 2. “Will God indeed dwell on the earth?”**
- 3. Our buildings honor God and we pray the do not devolve into human museums.**

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