

“The House of the Lord”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 28, 2018

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 96

I Kings 8:22-43

Last Sunday, we looked at the disturbing details of how – through his lust, deception and violence – King David took Bathsheba to be his wife; and how – despite this moral failure and the suffering it caused – God used it to accomplish something good: namely, the birth of their son, Solomon; who would succeed David on the throne and lead the Jewish people to one of their greatest milestones: the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Solomon was renowned for his wealth and his wisdom and love of learning, but the Temple was his crowning achievement. In this particular passage, Solomon offers a dedicatory prayer for the recently completed structure. The entire focus is on God’s history of faithfulness towards them: from the promise made to Abraham and Sarah to their rescue from famine through Joseph; from listening to their cries of bondage in Egypt to leading them through Moses during the Exodus wilderness. God had created a covenant with them in the Ten Commandments and guided them into the Holy Land. Now, many generations later, their Kingdom had been established and the Temple was complete and Solomon, on behalf of the whole people of Israel, was offering thanks.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the Temple – and therefore Jerusalem as its home – in Jewish theology and tradition. The Temple is the place of which God says, “my name shall be there.” (v. 29) It is the place where heaven meets earth and where God’s glory appears. The Temple that Solomon built will live in the Jewish imagination long after it is destroyed by the Babylonians several centuries later; and long after its replacement, the Second Temple, is again destroyed – this time by the Romans in the decades after Christ.¹

Solomon prays that God’s presence will fill the Temple and that the people will know that God is with them, and will hear them when they pray. The structure that he has built with the finest materials and adorned with gold and jewels is meant to represent God’s holy presence among them; it does not contain – or constrain – God, but reminds them who created them, chose them, rescued them, guided them, and loves them always.

In his prayer, Solomon goes into great detail about the various situations in which people might come and pray at the Temple. Our text today ends by focusing on one

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

scenario that the typical Jew of Solomon's day might not have anticipated. What if someone who is not Jewish, someone who "does not belong" to the people of Israel, a foreigner who hears about God and all his mighty acts, prays toward the Temple – would such a person be heard? Solomon prays that yes; God would "do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of earth may know your name." (v. 43)

In heeding the prayers of foreigners as well as Israelites, Solomon believes that God will cause all peoples of the earth to know the God of Israel. This reverence of foreigners shows that, out of all the different gods being claimed by various peoples, the God of Israel is the most powerful; and the Temple Solomon has built is where that God will dwell.

Here we see the missionary purpose of the Temple, and of God's covenant with the people of Israel as it was promised to Abraham and Sarah, when God told them that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:3) At times, Israel forgot this global vision, but God never did. God always intended to bless the entire world through the particular choice of Israel, and through God's dwelling in that particular place: the Temple that Solomon built; and – as we profess – through the incarnation of one particular person: Jesus Christ. Solomon's prayer looks forward and sees God favoring no one nation or race, but the whole of humanity. Anyone, coming from no matter how far away, who hears of this God and prays toward this one particular place will be heard and blessed.²

What, then, does a Temple – constructed almost 3000 years ago, halfway around the world – mean for us, here and now? Solomon admits in his prayer that the Temple is not God's permanent residence, nor is it the only place where a divine encounter might take place. Rather, it is where the needs of the petitioner coincide with God's willingness to respond. "The proof of God's amazing love is this," Paul says in Romans, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (5:8) Everything that Solomon proclaimed about the Temple is true also of Jesus – though particular in time and place, the risen Christ is God to us and for us, the one in whom God is made known to all people.

During his life on earth, Jesus spoke of a different kind of Temple, his own body. And so, the church is considered a body with different parts, different gifts and functions, but united in ministry and purpose. Like our human bodies, the church and its various members are broken and in need of healing.³ Humanity continues to struggle with the idea that God's blessing extends to all people; not just those that look, sound, think, or worship like us. Some among us – even if only an evil and disturbed few – want to limit God's blessing, to close the doors upon and exclude those who are in some way different from themselves; and do it in horrific ways.

² Stan Mast from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

³ Paul Bellan-Boyer, "Temple Talk"

Few times has this been more apparent than in the last several days. We know that we live in a violent world, but the levels of hatred and brutality that have been on display this week have been stunningly heartbreaking; and for me, they have hit close to home. I once worked in two of the congressional office buildings – one House and one Senate – where pipe bombs were sent to current members this week. When I attended Pittsburgh Seminary, I lived and worked less than a mile from the synagogue in Squirrel Hill that was attacked yesterday morning. And on each of our last three youth mission trips to Louisville, Kentucky, we shopped inside the very grocery store where a gunman shot two innocent victims.

We now know that each of these three situations were the result of the violent, depraved actions of a lone perpetrator; each of whom has now been captured by law enforcement. While the first, the pipe bomber, apparently had political motivations, the latter two – the shooters in Pittsburgh and in Kentucky – are now subjects of hate crime investigations. Both their words and their actions indicate that they selected their victims based on racial and religious bigotry; in both cases, there stands a clear violation of God's vision for humanity.

If these horrific events have hit close home to me, I'm certain that they have for many of you as well. It is appropriate that we should acknowledge the multiple, sometimes conflicting, emotions that arise during times such as this: anger or fear, exasperation or numbness. It is even more poignant because yesterday's shooting took place in a house of worship, where people were gathered for prayer. As we know from previous church or synagogue shootings, there will inevitably now be conversations about how it is possible to feel safe in such a vulnerable setting. I do not take lightly the fact that attending a worship gathering – whether in a church, a mosque, or a synagogue – offers no inherent guarantee of safety. As our local law enforcement officials have told us, there is really no effective way to protect ourselves from someone who might want to get in. But, instead of barricading ourselves, or arming ourselves, we instead must commit ourselves to pray and work for an end to violence and hate.

Last night, as I was watching the television coverage of the prayer vigil in Pittsburgh, the network showed a young boy, sitting on – presumably – his father's shoulders, holding a sign that read, "Hate and Violence Are Not the Answer." Wisdom indeed comes from the mouths – or, in this case, the hands – of children. For, in the face of hate and violence, and in the midst of all the different emotions that will wash over us, we still have a choice to make: will we respond with more hate and violence? Or, will we re-commit to the vision that God offers to us that we are intended to live as one human family; that race or religion or country of origin or gender identity do not determine how much God loves us, or we love each other; that the place or the way we choose to worship is not a reason to denigrate or divide?

Hate and violence are not the answer. As the people of God who gather for prayer and worship in this particular house of the Lord, we stand beside the many who are victims of hate and violence – directly or indirectly – perpetrated by a disturbed and misdirected few. Maybe this means you reach out to someone who has been particularly saddened or scared by the events of this past week. Maybe it means the next time you hear or read an inappropriate or hateful comment, you won't just let it slide. Or maybe, you will want to direct some of your energy or resources to a program or project that combats hatred and works for peace: tutoring children, helping victims of abuse, or combatting homelessness.

If we read between the lines, this dedicatory prayer that Solomon offers emerges from the events that the Jewish people had historically and recently endured: despite having settled in the land of promise, they were still the same people that God had rescued from bondage in Egypt; and though they had amassed wealth sufficient to construct a glorious Temple, they continued to face human enemies as well as a recent battle with drought and famine. The covenant that God had made with the Jewish people – *I will be your God, and you will be my people* – had led them this far, but it needed to be remembered and renewed. For the people of Israel had been chosen not for their own sake, but in order to be a blessing to others; so that one day, all people might come to know the love and faithfulness of God.

If nothing else, this last week has shown us that God's love for all people is not yet known, not by everyone. Instead of love, we have witnessed acts of hatred and violence. In this, our particular house of worship and prayer, we gather to listen for God's word to lead us, as we are sent out from here, to respond by praying and working for unity and peace. May we be so blessed that we – as God's people in this particular place – might be a blessing to others. AMEN.