

“Solomon’s Dedication”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 27, 2019

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 65

1 Kings 8:54-61

Last Sunday, we took a brief glimpse at King David at the moment where David danced before the Lord as the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem and placed back in the center of Israeli life. David’s reign was one of war and peace, followed by more war and more peace. David’s story is rich in detail – both what took place before last week’s reading: the tale of the little boy conquering the giant, the shepherd boy anointed to become king, the great warrior leading the tribes of Israel into a united kingdom; and what takes place afterwards: his sinful affair with Bathsheba, a married woman, followed by the shameful death of her husband, a soldier killed on the front lines after David ordered him into harm’s way. After David’s own death, his son, Solomon, born to him by Bathsheba, becomes king.

We are told that Solomon’s reign was spectacular; that Israel shined like a beacon under his rule. The kingdom was wealthy, the borders were relatively secure, and there was an outburst of the arts (Solomon is credited for writing vast numbers of proverbs and known for his unsurpassed wisdom) and building projects, including construction of the long-awaited and ornate Temple.

The prayer that we read this morning comes at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is the day and the occasion where the Ark – which Solomon’s father, David, had brought to Jerusalem and placed in a tent – is finally set in the Temple. It’s worth noting that while David danced without abandon, which is seen as a sign of his deep love for God, we see Solomon, his son, offer a long and formal prayer of dedication. While David offers his body and spirit, Solomon gives wise but measured words.

This may be a function – at least in part – of who is writing the story. The author (or quite possibly multiple authors) of I and II Kings seem to offer a more guarded account than we heard from the writers of I and II Samuel, which recounted the stories of David in such vivid detail. We can only imagine what juicy tales might have been shared about a king like Solomon who reigned under such a prosperous time, who married hundreds of wives, not to mention his relationships with concubines and other attendants; some who worshipped foreign gods. It must have been an interesting household!¹

Solomon was a builder, and he is rightfully remembered as the one who mustered the resources and the will to construct the Temple. And yet, there are some clues within

¹ John Holbert, “An Open-Hearted God, an Open-Hearted Worship”

the words of and circumstances surrounding Solomon's prayer of dedication that might give us deeper insight. Beneath its formality, we can get a glimpse of what may actually have been going on in Israel at this time, and what Solomon was asking his people to promise to God.

Solomon, before all of the gathered people of Israel, stretched out his hands, addressing God with the words: "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." (I Kings 8:23) Here we find a fundamental element of Israel's faith: God is One. There is no other god like the God of Israel. God has made a special covenant with the people of Israel and expects them to remain faithful to God, and this God only.

And yet, as the prayer continues, it becomes evident that everything is not well. There is reference to a terrible drought that has caused tremendous suffering to humans and animals alike. As such, there is a famine from blight, mildew, locusts and caterpillars that threatens the crops and the nation's food supply. There is also plague and sickness.

Reading between the lines, then, this prayer of Solomon does not simply celebrate this milestone achievement of Temple's completion, but emerges out of real pain and suffering. The prayer reveals an attempt to make sense of the many unfortunate or tragic events that broke into the lives of the Israelites those many centuries ago, just as it continues to happen in our time.²

Each year – on this, the final Sunday of October – Protestant Christian churches celebrate Reformation Sunday, when we remember Martin Luther's act of defiance on October 31, 1517, nailing 95 Theses (or complaints) to the door of a church in Germany; thus putting into motion the protest movement that would become the Reformation. Most people believe that Luther did not set out to divide the church – he was a Catholic priest, after all – but could not remain silent about the unfair and abusive practices he was watching. People were suffering, he thought, not necessarily from drought or famine, but because of favoritism and greed.

As a Protestant church, descended from the principles of the Reformation, we claim to be "Reformed, and always reforming." This means that we can and should be open to renewal and change when needed; that our faith is organic and living; that we need not defend the way things have always been done or pretend that mistakes have never been made.

As God's people who are reformed and always reforming, we also try to make sense of what is happening around us in our world. We have our own share of disasters: wildfires, floods and hurricanes among them, and we are seeking to better understand

² Juliana Classens from *WorkingPreacher.com*

how these are natural while at the same time affected by human action. Likewise, there exists global famine and migration that results from a complex weaving of environmental and geo-political circumstances.

Next Sunday, we – along with friends and neighbors – will be working with *Rise Against Hunger* packaging meals for some of those affected by drought, disaster, war or dislocation. As people of faith, we seek to understand why such great need exists and how, with God’s leading, we are to best try to alleviate it. We have chosen to partner with this organization because they have a good record of working in disaster relief but also with the goal of eliminating hunger by 2030 through a combination of short and long-term solutions; offering emergency relief with an eye to economic development; giving a fish while also teaching how to fish.

And while we’ll be putting some of our resources toward this project, we are cognizant of resources that are needed in other areas as well. Over the next few weeks, some of the church’s elders will be speaking to you about some of the material projects and needs for this church; and specifically for our nearly fifty year-old sanctuary and our nobody-really-knows-how-old well water system. As with the meal packaging event, these projects require money.

It might not be popular, or comfortable, for many of us to talk about money in church. But if we take Solomon, the great builder, and his prayer as our guide; we’re reminded that there is nothing profane about putting resources to work for God. He stood squarely within the tension that the material needs of the building the Temple might have been interpreted as taking away resources from a battle against famine and disease. Some might think this criticism would be justified; others would argue that Solomon was being obedient to God’s leading.

Solomon’s prayer of dedication reminds us that in the same way God was with our ancestors – removing their bonds of oppression, speaking out for justice, leading and guiding them to a better land – so also God will be with us. Therefore, we are called to walk in the ways of God, following his commandments offered to us, as a thankful response to God’s grace. This grace is not conditional; we are not presented with an “if...then” choice. God loves us and has chosen us and blesses us. Nothing that we do or fail to do will change this calculus. Although the Old Testament is filled with prophecies and warnings about falling out of God’s grace, it is instead a revelation of what the people of God choose in response to God. Will they remain faithful, or worship other Gods? Will they work for justice, or turn their backs on those among them who are in need?

And so, when it comes time for us to make our choices – as we constantly do – it is not out of fear that God will abandon us; or condemn us. No, God’s grace has already been made known to us as individuals and to the people of God’s church. Nothing on earth – no decision, no circumstance, no idol or “small-g” god – can separate us from

God's love; or, as Solomon says to the people, "Know that the Lord is God, there is no other." (I Kings 8:60)

So, when the time comes for us to make our choices, it takes place in the light of God's grace. Our thankful response is to act in accordance with what we discern is God's will for our lives: for our time, our energies, our resources, and our relationships. Some among us tend to be like David: we are exuberant in our faith, putting our whole selves in, and seemingly throwing caution to the wind. Others of us might be more like Solomon, the great builder: more cautious and meticulous in planning and execution.

It would be wonderful if we all could just say that we appreciate each other's differing opinions and outlooks, but we know it's not that simple. For usually, we are not only practitioners but also advocates of a particular way. Many, especially among the generation before me, were the builders of our churches, including this church and this sanctuary in which we sit. They had the foresight, will and ability to take on a project of this scale. Others, especially – from what I can discern – of the generation after me, seem less interested in having things – like buildings or sets of china for 12 – and more interested in experiences; in going out and doing.

In a church, each of these outlooks and perspectives are – and should be – represented. Building projects and mission projects are both noble and tenable pursuits; and one does not preclude the other. The rub comes when it's time to make choices; to prioritize who we are today and – in the spirit of the Reformation – who we are being molded by God to be for tomorrow.

And so, all of us are in need of God's grace; and – thanks be to God – we have received it. God was revealed to the people of Israel, time and again, as a forgiving God; a God who has and will continue to lead the reforming and renewal of God's people. And so, we give thanks that God molds us to think and act in different ways; to have different outlooks and opinions when the time comes to make a choice. We are called both to build up the church and to reach out to the world, working for justice and peace. These are different, but not mutually exclusive. May it remind us that though we are different, we can – as Jesus teaches us – at the same time be one. Amen.