

PENTECOST XIII – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Solomon was not David's favorite son. That was Absalom, and if you have been doing Morning Prayer the past couple of weeks you heard about his rebellion against David and his wanting to take over the throne while David was still alive. He came to a strange end, for though he was a man of great skill in battle, his flying long hair got caught in the branches of a tree and his mule ran out from beneath him. David's counsellor made sure he died, and the insurrection was over. So, David lived to a ripe old age, and he left the kingdom to his son Solomon, born to him and Bathsheba (the woman he seduced and whose husband he set up to be killed in battle). David may have been a great king, but he was neither a nice man nor an honorable one.

Solomon became the third king of Israel, the second in the Davidic line, and God had promised David that his line would rule virtually forever. God asked Solomon through one of his ministers what gifts Solomon wanted, and he chose something that seems unexpected by the historians of Israel. He did not choose wealth or successes in battle—nothing that would make him look or feel great; Solomon chose the gift of wisdom. That pleased God immensely, for it seemed that Solomon wanted to love and serve his people as much as God loved them. We don't really see that trait in David, nor in any of the many generations of successors to Solomon in the history of the Jewish people. In his early years as king, Solomon was loyal and faithful to God, which was not true in his old age, when he started to follow other gods, those of his foreign wives.

Today's story from 1Kings is very interesting. By this time Solomon has become a great king, one of the richest of any of the kingdoms in what we now call the Middle East, and he was known for his wisdom. His father David had wanted to build a house for God, but because of David's disobedience, God would not let him do that. Solomon had the same dream, and this time God went along with the plan.

In the early part of their history, the Jews had been a nomadic people, following their flocks from one good grazing ground to another, living in tents that they could pack up and take along. If you have ever been in a Bedouin tent, you know they can be extremely elaborate, with wonderful materials covering the cushions they reclined on and wonderful woven rugs on the floor. I am sure that tents, like houses, were as elaborate or as plain as the owner could afford.

God's house had never been a building. It was a simple, carved wooden tabernacle on legs, with two long poles put through it so four men could carry it into battle or ahead of the people as they moved from place to place. It was called "the ark of the covenant," and only certain men were empowered to carry it. Anyone else who touched it died on the spot. I believe it was sheltered by some sort of open-air tent when they came to a stopping place.

When Solomon began to build, he gathered his finest builders and craftsmen and called on them to design the most beautiful and magnificent building they could, beyond anything they had ever seen. He put out word to the neighboring kings, and in tribute to him, they sent some of the finest building materials in the area. Hiram, the king of Tyre, was especially helpful in sending many cedars from Lebanon. The craftsmen and carpenters carved and assembled all these materials into a magnificent building, much of it overlaid with gold, and the people were in awe of its splendor. We get the idea that this was an

attempt to capture the feeling of the throne room of heaven mentioned in many of the texts of the prophets. This is the lead-in to today's OT text, which is on the day of the dedication of what became known as the Temple. We are told "the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, under the wings of the cherubim. And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."

That had never happened before. This manifestation astounded the people and hushed the crowd who had been marveling at the beauty of the Temple. Here was something that was more wondrous than the building itself. Years ago, when I first read and took in this story, I found it powerfully moving, and very unexpected. I think I expected Solomon to be vainglorious, lording it over the crowds and all his people, and I saw and heard something very different. The author tells us that "Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of the ancestral houses of Israel and spread out his hands to heaven." Now we get to hear what Solomon believed; we hear him in prayer before God, and instead of vanity and pomp, we see and hear the simplicity of his faith, the depth of his devotion: "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, 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." Solomon speaks more about this promise, revealing that he sees himself and his people in the care of the God of history, and then he enters more deeply into his prayer, with a little musing about what is happening that day, about the grandeur and majesty of God. Solomon seems to be

stricken with abject awe. We see and hear the great king being humbled in the face of the magnificence of his God.

Listen to his musing again: “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! 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; 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. 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.”

I so love this prayer, and I love the man who prays it. This is a man who knows that in his heart of hearts he is simply a servant, that whatever pomp and circumstance he is adorned with as the king, he is above all—or shall we say, underneath all—Solomon is a servant leader, a man who is to lead with love and compassion and empathy and hold his people up, hold his people together through the witness of his own faith, not to manipulate his people, but to inspire them. Solomon seeks to point to the One in whom he believes, the God who has given life to his father before him, the God who speaks to him and counsels him about the best and most courageous way to lead his people and serve them. Solomon is not perfect, but he is the best example of a grace-filled political leader we have.

That first version of the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in the middle of the 6th Century BCE. It was rebuilt a few centuries after the Israelites’ return from exile, and then destroyed a second time by the Romans in 70 C.E. Please note that Israel’s enemies believed that the most demoralizing thing they could do to the Israelites was to

destroy what was most sacred to them, the Temple, with the hope that this act would lead the Israelites into confusion and despair, which it did both times. It is informative to look at the attack on our United States Capitol Building in that same light, an attack intended to arrest and cripple the power of the central government, even challenge the right of the government to go on. We are living with the aftermath of that. What is different between us and first century Israel is that the Capitol was harmed but not destroyed; the Temple was destroyed.

Today we have yet another of John's writings about what we have come to call the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ. When the early Christians first started observing the Eucharist to recreate and memorialize the Last Supper, it was an event for slightly more than a family, small groups of various sizes. There was a process of "calling" the men who would lead such worship, which meant discerning the depth of their faith and the ways they could be trusted in that time of persecution. The early communities gathered in houses, and they sat in a circle. As those communities grew, they needed larger spaces but kept the circular form. The presider was given a chair at a particular place in the circle, and when he assumed his place, that was when the liturgy began. For a long time, the Church utilized this basilica form, with an altar in the center, and a special place amid them for the readings from scripture to be delivered. It was not until about 1000 C.E. that the Church developed the elongated structures which became most familiar to us until the middle of the 20th Century. It was only then, that, like the Temple, there was a way to symbolize "the throne room of heaven." The drawback to that style is that it emphasizes transcendence and distance, with God "way out there somewhere," rather than immanence and intimacy, "with God in the hearts of the people." I am glad we have moved in this direction.

I have wanted to talk about this in a sermon because I understand this building which we use for our worship was designed and built well after this congregation was begun. There was great controversy about building it at the time, with some so opposed that they left the parish in its first significant division. Their thought was that the parish did not need to build a church that it could not afford. It is interesting that both groups were right. At that time, those who wanted to expand the space so the church could grow, gave enough money to build it. Their faith and hope were very powerful, and together they built this wonderful building. But, as with all churches, it was built for a congregation that was growing, whose people had enough resources to maintain it and the ministries they wanted. Those with the dream won that argument, although it cost them some fellow parishioners. Those who left the parish perhaps foresaw the future, for as the people of the congregation aged, as their children grew up and moved away, as some of them moved away to be near their adult children and grandchildren and others died, there were fewer pledges for the support of the church, which is the state we are in now, after being further decimated in numbers and participation by COVID. Most churches at the present time need a new infusion of hope and pledges to have a new start. It is wonderful that those forebears who dreamt of this church gave enough money to build it well. Yet in the generations since then, there have not been enough bequests and annual pledges to cover the annual costs of the building and grounds and the costs of the mission you want to engage and the ministry you wish to receive. It is this generation that needs to decide whether you can be as generous in your day as your forebears were in theirs. That involves your annual giving and the bequests and special gifts that will underwrite all the costs associated with the operation of the buildings.

This is a big challenge for you. And you are not alone. I would guess that it is only those congregations in any denomination who are currently at their highest level of membership and participation that are not facing this dilemma. Almost all of those are young/new congregations who have not yet experienced the aging of the original generation and have not had any kind of dispute which has split the congregation in any way. In other words, they, too, will face this dilemma one day.

Besides an infusion of money, is there any way out? I think there is, but that does not mean that I want to dismiss or minimize the need for money. The question is, what will lead you to invest more of yourself and your resources into our common life? How much do this community and God's mission here mean to you? *Amen.*

+JLJ