

Sermon Proper 16B1 August 22, 2021 Fr. Nick Smith
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43 Psalm 84 Ephesians 6:10-20 John 6:56-69

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

In this morning's first reading, from the Old Testament First Book of Kings, we return to the story of Solomon, King David's famous son and successor. Last week, you may recall, we eavesdropped on Solomon's private prayer to God in a dream, when he had asked for the gift of wisdom enough to rule the people successfully. God then generously responded, giving Solomon that and much more. Now, eleven years later, the fruits of King Solomon's success, of his wisdom and his creative leadership, have resulted in the construction of the First Jerusalem Temple, and we hear the King's public prayer to God during its dedication. Solomon has had craftsmen build the Temple of the finest materials: the cedars of Lebanon, cypress wood, gold, silver, bronze, and huge blocks of cut and dressed stone. Carved into the walls of the Temple were elaborate decorations of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. He overlays everything—even the floor—with gold. It is a magnificent building, inside and out. You may recall that King David had kept the Ark of the Covenant, at God's insistence, in a tent, accentuating its mobility among the people. But the new King, in his wisdom, knew that no matter how splendid the palatial temple, it could only represent God's own name, not confine God, or the covenant Israel had with God, to any building, or for that matter, the ark itself.

The Ark is brought to the new Temple and situated in the Holy of Holies, and God's presence is made known through the iconic cloud which fills the place, even forcing the priests to retreat from there. But despite all the drama, God's name has been given a new postal address by King Solomon, an accomplishment which eluded David his father. Solomon has shown more faithfulness and wisdom than even the great and beloved David. No simple shepherd boy turned warrior and statesman was he. When you read his stories, you may notice that he has no prophet sidekick like the former and later Judean kings. Saul had his prophet Samuel, and David had his Nathan, but Solomon sits on the throne alone, without the need, apparently, of a prophetic companion and conscience. You might say that he was a 'do-it-yourselfer', with God's divine help. It seems that, by the gifts of the Spirit, Solomon has the wisdom and faithfulness of a prophet himself. And to round-out his resume, he also has boundless ambition. Thankfully, at least at this point in his life, that ambition is in synch with God's dream for the people. What Solomon is able to ambitiously achieve is graciously just what God hopes for. And during his reign, the people of Israel are propelled to the highest peak of their Biblical history.

When people ask me what an Episcopalian is, and they frequently do, I typically begin by saying that we are "sacramental". To me, that means that we find it holy to set aside our more selfish nature to align our will with that of God's dream for humankind, for all of creation. We have the intention of being people of God. For fact, all of the various Christian traditions would probably say the same. But this alignment, this synchronization of intent, is both a deliberate and a faithful choice. Think of the baptismal or confirmation promises we make, to avoid evil, return to the Lord's flock of sheep, and to respect the dignity of every human being, no matter what, and to love our neighbor, even the most repulsive ones. Think of the wedding vows, or any other promises we make on behalf of God's grace, on behalf of Jesus and his teaching. It's a hard question that Jesus poses in today's Gospel lesson, one which not everyone is willing to make. So, some leave, and those who remain do so because they see the truth in Jesus's message, as uncomfortable as it might seem. It is reflected in the question that is often considered by those who would be faithful: what do I truly profess? What do I really intend to do? What commitments am I able to make, and which ones do I really think I can follow through on?

In the spring of 1972, I bought my first home. Its postal address was in the rather ritzy area of Fayetteville, but it was in some disrepair and the victim of some neglect. It was an antique house, with antique wiring, antique plumbing, and apparently had been cobbled together with used parts from even older homes. It had been built, so I learned, in the 1850s as a tenant house for the family which resided in the more one of the remarkable homes on Genesee St. Nonetheless, I was happy to have it, cherished it, and intended to make it the home for my young family for many years to come. Among other things, it really needed painting.

Not ever having been a glamorous home, it had been finished off with what we used to call “cove siding”. That is to say, there was no real siding, only the tongue and groove boards attached directly to the construction studs. I figured I had 3 choices: either continue to work my way around the house painting the boards the way they were, hiring someone to cover the outside with some kind of aluminum siding, or make a commitment to really do it right and add cedar siding myself. I decided that it was important enough to do it myself, although, of course, I had no idea how to do it, and no experience that would help me.

Now, in adding siding to a house, you begin at the bottom, making sure all the way around that the boards you nail up are straight and true. As I was able to afford it, I took my old pick-up to the lumber yard and selected the best cedar boards I could find. And so I started the project, with the good intention of doing the best carpentry job anyone had ever seen. But see, when you get that first layer nailed up, you’ve made your choice, you’ve made a commitment. There’s really no going back. But I was enthusiastic enough to faithfully continue the project, while my first wife shook her head and while the neighbors scratched theirs, and, while it took me a couple of years, I made good progress. It was looking good. But remember I said that I began at the bottom and worked my way up: Towards the end of the project, I needed each day to climb the long extension ladder to reach even higher up the outside walls. And, so, one Saturday morning I got up early, determined to finish that front peak area and complete that part of the project before my skeptical neighbors were even out of bed.

It had rained a lot during the night, but had stopped briefly, long enough for me, still wearing my moccasin slippers, to take that aluminum extension ladder, hoist it up and swing it around to the front peak of the house. I was in a hurry, and didn’t even look up...I knew where I wanted it to be placed. But before that metal ladder found its intended placement against the wall, it first found the main electrical wiring leading to the house. And I unexpectedly met Mr. Electricity in person. Yes, here I am standing in a puddle of water, holding the metal ladder in my bare hands, making a convenient and direct grounding for all of Niagara Mohawk’s best power. I threw that ladder out into the street, and still buzzing from stem to stern, wobbling like a drunken sailor, went inside and clumsily tried to wake up my wife and get some sympathy. It wasn’t forthcoming. Well, I hadn’t done any permanent damage, although it might explain a lot, now that I think about it! Having made a commitment, done my best to fulfill what I needed to do, I had made an error, a mistake, a dangerous one, despite my “good intentions”. I expect that this is not especially unfamiliar to you, either; we all make mistakes, we all sometimes disappoint each other, disappoint ourselves, and probably disappoint God, too. Hey, we’re only human, we’re only flesh and blood, after all.

But here’s the good news: [I always like to preach the good news!] we are not alone, we are not in some vast wasteland of our own consequences. We have the blessed gifts of the Holy Spirit to aid and assist us. To sustain and invigorate us. So says Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. We have the gifts of the Spirit. In the portion we heard today, Paul encourages us to put on the armor of God, this wonderful gift of both protection and confidence, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, and the sword of scripture. And for your feet, the army boots of peacemaking. These are precious and useful gifts, made possible by your sponsor, the Holy Spirit of God. In and of yourself, you are likely to fall short, but by receiving these free gifts, you have meshed your own best intentions with those of the Almighty, and your risk of failure is substantially diminished. With God’s help, those good intentions of yours may result in great things, in a foothold for the Kingdom of grace, in honest-to-God miracles. So, go ahead, fearless and enthusiastic, to make those faithful choices and commit to those complicated projects, knowing that you are not alone, that God has provided blessings, gifts, and life to help see you through the challenges you choose in the name of Christ. May you have the wisdom of young Solomon, the confidence of old Paul, and the commitment of those disciples who chose to continue following Jesus. Amen