

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.26.18
Scripture:

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11] 22-30, 41-43

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. ⁶ Then 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, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ¹⁰ And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, ¹¹ 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. 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.

Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

I finally finished reading Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*. Not a long book, or a particularly difficult one, it took me several weeks to get through just for it being summer.

As you may know, Erich Fromm was a German-born Jew. He wrote *Escape...* when he'd first arrived in the United States in 1941. It was, I gather, his attempt at coming to understand why a free and democratic people might elect authoritarianism, as the Germans did with Hitler. The basic thesis he builds on is that freedom is a terrible burden. Along with it being the greatest blessing, it's also terrifically burdensome, and so not something every people will choose for themselves all the time.

One way to escape from it, according to Dr. Fromm, is authoritarianism, rallying behind an authoritarian personality rather than a democratic one—because democracy is exhausting, and slow and painstaking, so sometimes a people will just be too tired for democratic decision-making, or too demoralized or frustrated or embittered or resentful. Sometimes it's just preferable to have someone really take charge—providing, of course they're taking charge for your sake.

"...appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations," the people told the prophet Samuel to tell the Lord. "Give us a king to govern us."

This was about three millennia ago.

The first king they got when they'd asked for this, Saul, tended toward tyranny, erratic and violent, just as the people had been warned could happen with a king. Too much power in one person's hands. The next two, David and Solomon, are remembered as more good, but only in the relative sense, not in the absolute sense.

Prior to all this, of course, the people had been answerable mostly to the Lord God, His will though adjudicated by judges. But that was getting exhausting, confusing, dysfunctional. The judges weren't necessarily wise and good, and the people wouldn't necessarily acquiesce to their judgments. And what of when one judge differed in judgment from another judge? Who to listen to?

Plus, the stakes were higher now, now that the people had land, which comes attended by wars, the need to defend the land. It also, of course, came with the possibility of imagining and investing in their future, which means a developing civilization. But advanced civilization is also a sword that cuts both ways.

No, once nomads, accepting life and livelihood as it came to them, and before that slaves, with no agency at all, now the people were seen not just as a gathering of people of the same social underclass or the same circumstance, but as a nation. And now they had land whose borders they needed to defend, and now there was need of a politics by which they could allocate their real resources. And now they had international relations to concern themselves with, on top of the intra-national decisions that the law of God, the Torah, was supposed to settle for them.

To sum up, suddenly, things had gotten complicated.

“...appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations.”

A free, equal, and consensus-driven people will choose that sometimes—and this could go either way, monarch or tyrant.

This is the tragedy of it—that inter-sown with the seeds of blessing are the seeds of downfall. Wheat and weeds.

I’m not alone in seeing this progressing civilization as both blessing and tragedy. I haven’t read much Walter Brueggemann lately, but this is one impression I often have of his Old Testament scholarship: that the maturation of the people from slaves to nomads to a landed nation isn’t unambiguously good. There’s tragedy in this maturation, as much loss as gain.

It seems to me Solomon would have concurred—and maybe this could be considered fruit of the prayer at the beginning of his reign. Following a bloody struggle over succession at the end of David’s life, when it was finally established that Solomon would be king, the Lord came to Solomon in a dream after he’d worshiped at the altar in Gibeon, and the Lord said, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon prayed for wisdom. “Because you have asked this,” the Lord spoke again, “and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

Yes, maybe it was by this quality, wisdom, that Solomon was able to admit the truth in that one brief moment while blessing the Temple.

The Temple: it had taken seven years to build, and thirty thousand conscripted men. It had taken leadership and treasure and physical might exerted all over the land, from forests to quarries to mines. And it was Solomon's to do, though David had wanted to. But David had been a man of war, someone who had, according to 1st Chronicles, "shed much blood on the earth in [the Lord's] sight," and this disqualified him from being the one to build it. He would have to content himself with being the one to win back the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines, one final act of war. He would bring it back to Jerusalem, dancing naked before its coming. It would be laid in the Tabernacle, which had been erected and dismantled in the desert countless times and would now serve until the Temple took its permanent place.

Solomon saw it a little differently, it should be said; or he claimed to a dispatch to the King of Tyre to north. When in touch with Hiram about those storied cedars in his realm, which Solomon intended to have felled for the building of the Temple, he wrote, "You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. So I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God."

Whichever was the case, be it a matter of judgment against David or practicalities in what else David had to do, Solomon would oversee the endeavor, the penultimate step of which was to bring the ark into the holy place: "There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses had placed there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites, when they came out of the land of Egypt. 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."

Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in for ever." So, yes, now it was finished, complete. Perfect, in fact, and beautiful, and grand, and mighty, and established like something that might never be moved. And now the Ark of the Covenant—the Covenant, this by which the people became a people in the first place—had taken its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place. And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, and Solomon stood before the altar and prayed. He prayed that the Lord would never fail to

establish a successor to the throne of Israel, and that the Lord's name shall be in the Temple just as the Lord promised it would, and that even foreigners would hear of this place and its indwelling of the Lord's name and they would come to it and find a hearing before the Lord.

Awesome!

But...

there was also this, a strange concession.

I wonder, did he whisper it? Did Solomon whisper it, mutter it under his breath, an unconscious, spontaneous utterance that let slip out the truth?

Or did he declare it, though in some hope that it would be missed among all other things he had to say?

Or did everyone already know it so there was no shame or new admission of the absurd in his saying out loud in front of a gathered crowd after all this time and effort: "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."

Huh. It's like a moment out of a Monty Python sketch, comic for its being tragic and for everyone knowing that.

So, apparently, the Temple would not achieve its aim, because its aim was not something that could be achieved—which they knew going into this, lo those many laborious years ago? Or had they deluded themselves into thinking otherwise? What energized their building of this if they knew it wouldn't serve as intended?

Maybe it's just my reading of Erich Fromm.

Maybe it's just his interesting side note that an awareness of the tragic aspect of life is a sign of, and means for, social health and vitality.

Maybe it's his helpful insight that "our era simply denies death...[denies the tragic, which is one fundamental aspect of life...and] one of the strongest incentives for life, the basis for human solidarity, and an experience without which joy and enthusiasm lack intensity and depth..." And maybe it's his too blunt conclusion that Christianity might bear some responsibility for this collective denial—Christianity, which he claims "has made [the tragic, and death itself] unreal, and tried to comfort the unhappy individual by promises of life after death."

For what it's worth, I think this reading fails to take into account how very much death is a part of the Christian formulation and faith. We face it every time we approach our faith or act out of our faith—this faith that is founded in the cross, founded in the fact that our Lord (even our *Lord!*) died. So we will die, each of us, all of us. Even societies, civilizations will die. As for our Lord, so for each of us and all, death is real. Like our Lord, we will die. And, like our Lord, we will rise to life outside of time and history, utterly changed, now imperishable. The fact of our having been here at all makes it so we will never not be. Our being, our existence, is the beginning of our eternity.

Fromm gets it wrong, blithely, bluntly casting Christianity as if it's a clear and settled matter, and, worse, one that utterly falls short of holding truth and existence in its embrace. Because, if you ask me, the Christian story is one still unfolding and enlightening, one long and yet lived out by so many people in so many contexts motivated by so many things from moment to moment that to sum it up in one sentence is absurd beyond even building a house for the Lord all while knowing the Lord doesn't need a house.

We do, though—both for ourselves and for our God. We need things, and that's enough for God to grant them.

Or do we?

The Letter to the Ephesians comes to us from a different time. Likely written long after Paul's life and death, it comes to us from the year 80 or maybe 100. In other words, the Temple has been felled a second time. The first time, of course, it was Babylon to bring it to ruin, about 400 years after Solomon built it. Rebuilt a generation later, it was most recently, just ten or so years before this letter, reduced to rubble by Rome, which also subjected the Jews and the early Church to attack and outright war. For all this, there was little the people "of the book" could call their own, and there was much to defend against.

So it was that the people should be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. So it was that the people should take up the whole armor, not an armor for attacking but an armor for withstanding attack—the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that make staying on the move for the sake of the gospel most swift and light, the shield of faith that can cast away even the flaming swords of evil, and as for the sword of this armor, it is but a word, though

the word of truth and there for as incisive as any sword, and threatening and deadly but only as regards falsehood, that which when truth is uttered cannot stand.

We as American Christians are a far cry from this sort of bare living—and it would be foolish to insist otherwise, foolish and false. We have tremendous earthly wealth and power, unimaginable earthly comfort and ease, all of which, as of old, is both blessing and tragedy. But one thing these stories of our faith suggest to us, coming to us from times as different as history can possibly contain, is that God is ever with us, filling the building up and the tearing down with continued blessing and faithful presence, renewing in its tumultuous midst the promise as of old and spurring us on to a future that we can trust will be, though hard won, yet bright—and moreover bright for more and deeper and stranger aspects of the creation.

What tragedy history amounts to God's love and redemption transform to comedy—the absurdities of life come to spur laughter, the heartbreaks of life now redeemed with purpose and fulfillment, the death that clings so closely now revealed as but a moment of transformation (the twinkling of an eye) from time to eternity—very real, very painful, very frightening, and very much not the last word God would speak.

This is the big picture. After worship, we return to the onslaught of breaking news, headlines, tweets. Through it all, let God's grandeur hold you, hold *us*, in such a way that we have tried to hold God. Our failure to do so was, and is, and always will be a tragic, comic, lovely one; and our admission of this is admission into loving embrace.

Thanks be to God.