

Pentecost 14B, August 25, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. 1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Gospel: John 6:56-69

[Jesus said,] ⁵⁶“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “**Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.** ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Sermon



One of the Gospel acclamations in the Lutheran hymnal goes like this: “Alleluia, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia, Alleluia.”¹

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Setting 3, p. 142. Augsburg Fortress, 2006

We sang this today. “Lord to whom shall we go?” That is the deep question of today’s Gospel...and the deep question for all of us. Let’s look at how King Solomon answered the question while we ponder how WE will answer it.

Dear King Solomon – son of David and Bathsheba. Last week we listened to the story of how he prayed for wisdom because he feared his lack of ability to govern his people. And, in his dream, God promised him not only wisdom, but also riches and power. The prequel to this story was bloody intrigue that made him king.

His father David had wanted to build a temple for the Ark of the Covenant, the nation’s portable place of worship, but Nathan, the prophet, told David God wanted Solomon to do it. It took twenty years to build the magnificent temple. Solomon imported massive amounts of cedar, cypress, and gold from foreign lands, enslaved many workers, and employed armies of stonecutters. Today’s reading is part of Solomon’s prayer of dedication of that temple.

Solomon is clear that “even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain” God, much less the house that he, Solomon, has built. But he prays that God will hear the prayers of people – even foreigners – when they pray there.

When we look back at the Creation stories, we don’t read that God created Israelites, gentiles, Americans or any other particular group. We only read that God created people. The Israelites had been very exclusive, but in the wisdom of Solomon’s prayer, the foreigners are included.

I suggest you read further in the book of I Kings. You’ll read the story of Solomon’s great wisdom, the visit from the Queen of Sheba who marveled at his riches and brilliance, and you’ll read of the 1,000 women in his palaces: princesses, wives, concubines. Sadly, you’ll also read of Solomon’s demise. Among those 1,000 women were foreign women and, to please them, Solomon began to worship their gods along side the God of Israel. He worshiped Astarte, Milcom, Chemosh, Molech, and others. We read in chapter 11 (v. 9), “Then the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord...”

Enemies arose and the downfall of Solomon’s kingdom began. His sons fought bloody battles; the kingdom was divided. After extensive war and intrigue, eventually, about 400 years later, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple and took the Israelites into Babylonian captivity.

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Lord, to whom shall we go? Solomon answered in a way that led him away from his God. Seduced by his reputation, his riches, power and his harem, he lost his soul. His magnificent temple and amazing palaces – to house all those women and their servants – blinded him perhaps as well.

Well, we do put a lot of love into our church building (our roof!). And that’s good. Solomon loved his beautiful temple. And, like Solomon, we DO know that God can’t be put into a box, but that we can worship and pray here, perhaps more intentionally than elsewhere. We admire Solomon’s wisdom when he asked God to hear the prayers of people who were foreign to Israel.

On the negative side, we are saddened by Solomon’s betrayal of his faith in the God who was named “I am.”

I was saddened to hear a radio announcer this week say, “Well, people used to find community at church, but nobody goes there anymore, so they find community in fan-dom, following a singer or a band or a team.”

Lord, to whom shall WE go?

If you were to ask what is most important in our Sunday morning, many of us  would say, the community. It’s the relationships here: between God and us and between one another: a relationship in the shape of a cross.

Yes, we will seek special funds to repair our roof, but more importantly we will seek funds on a regular basis to keep our doors open for the relationships we value and for guests who choose to walk through these doors and become friends.

In our second reading we hear Paul encourage his early-Christian followers to be strong. I love the verse, “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” (Eph. 6:15). Be grounded in peace-making.

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Today’s Gospel reading concludes the five weeks of Jesus’ Bread of Life words; each week the words grew a bit stronger. This week some of the disciples decide the words are too difficult. Eating and drinking flesh and blood sounds really awful. Those who turned away did not understand the symbolic significance of the words. They couldn’t comprehend that Jesus meant we were invited to become just like him, to accept his nature. And that nature, we have come to learn, is a nature of love, healing, caring, sacrificing for others. That nature bound him to God, whom he called “Father”, so closely that coming to Jesus was also coming to

God – the God of covenant relationship, of mercy, of love, of eternal life, the Great “I am.”

When Jesus’ listeners left offended, he asks the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answers, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

We join Peter in proclaiming that Jesus’ words are “words of eternal life.” Coming to trust and obey God was coming to trust and obey Jesus – and eternal life is life lived now in that state of faith and obedience.

There's where Solomon went off the rails. He abandoned faith and obedience. He obtained power by harming others. He enslaved people to build his temple and palaces. His shoes did not fit him to proclaim the gospel of peace; bloodshed surrounded his accomplishments and was carried on by his offspring.

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A cartoon shows a grandmother lying in bed, wide awake. The words above her head say, “I can’t sleep because I keep remembering every bad mistake I made over the course of my entire life. Where are my senior memory problems when I need them?²”

I imagine King Solomon in his old age thinking much the same way. I imagine St. Paul thinking that way. I imagine Jesus’ disciples thinking that way. I think much the same way, and perhaps some of you do too.

I invited you to read further in the book of I Kings. And I invite you to read further in John’s gospel. Solomon’s story evolves. Jesus’ discourses with the religious leaders evolve. In both cases, strife and division arise.

But then comes the story in John’s gospel when the religious leaders bring a woman to Jesus, tell him that she had committed adultery, and ask him if she should be stoned to death. Jesus said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7). When all who condemned her slipped away, Jesus said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.”

It's a remarkable statement of forgiveness and encouragement. I would like David and Solomon and Paul to hear those words. I need to hear those words. I would

² Remarkd by the Rev. Dr. Bruce Modahl in “Crossing Connection”, Pentecost 2024 edition.

like to be the grandmother who sleeps soundly and rests in the grace of those words. I would like you to hear and believe them also.

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In the middle of the night we can be frightened by the sin that haunts us, or a broken relationship, or the weight of the world, or the many problems of our lives. Like a child runs to his parent after a bad dream, we are invited to run to our heavenly Parent and to Jesus our brother, to hear the words of eternal life: you are loved and forgiven, wear the shoes of peace.

Jesus, bread of life, invites us to trust his assurance of forgiveness – by day or in the dark hours of the night. Here in this temple we are fitted with the shoes that make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life. Amen.

Outtake:

*Jesus asked the twelve,
“Do you also wish to go away?”
Simon Peter answered him,
“Boss, where else could we turn?
You have the words of eternal life.”*
—John 6.67-68

Among all the teachers of wisdom, and there are many,
what I listen for is the truth that connects me
with the heart of all things,
the Love at the center of the universe,
the words beyond words
full of life that is infinite,
that are the Word that speaks everything into being,
the Life that was before all, is in all,
and will outlive all.

For that, Jesus is my man.
Nobody else quite has the depth of it,
the joy and sorrow and healing and generosity
and suffering and courage and mystery and forgiveness
and through it all this gobsmacking trust

in the grace that never fails.
He's the one who hands me the heart of God
and says, "Here, it's yours."

His is the love that can heal my soul,
charge my heart, and raise me from the dead.
There's nobody else I'm drawn to listen to
so much, so deeply, so needy, so happy.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes