

“Will You Really?”
August 27, 2006

Ephesians 15-20
1 Kings 8:22-30

This morning, for the first time in our journey together, we encounter Solomon, King of ancient Israel and son of King David. In today’s reading, we meet him as he offers a prayer of dedication for the newly built Jerusalem temple. This is the temple that King David had wanted to build but did not, because God wanted Solomon to build it.

The portion of the prayer I read a few moments ago has two themes. In the first, Solomon repeatedly reminds God of the promises God made to David, and in the second, Solomon asks God always to hear and heed the prayers that the people offer in the temple. All in all, I’d say, so far so good. A little reminder here – yoohoo, God, remember what you’ve promised – and a little heartfelt plea there – please listen and answer when we call out to you.

But between the reminder and the plea is one short question that can seem a little odd to me. After all the work and glory of building the temple and despite all the ways in which Solomon and the whole people of ancient Israel have experienced the care and protection of God, Solomon still feels the need to ask, “But will God indeed dwell on earth?” Solomon *still* feels the need to ask, “Will you really be with us? Care for us? Protect us? Will you *really*?”

One (not very compassionate) way to hear this question is that Solomon is simply being a whiner. As we have received the story, Solomon could have found plenty of evidence of God’s steadfastness by looking at his own life, at his father’s life, and at the lives and history of his people. But, somehow, maybe that’s not enough for Solomon, and he’s asking – or *whining* – for even more proof, even more reassurance that God can be trusted. Maybe Solomon is being a bit like the young adult I was, when early in my legal career I was whining about something to the woman who was working as my secretary. I don’t have any idea *what* I was whining about, but I do have a vivid memory of how Rebecca responded. She looked me dead in the eye and said, “Nancy, you have a good job, a roof over your head, enough to eat, and someone at home who loves you ... what *is* your problem?” ... The Southern saying for a moment like that is, “Well, shut my mouth,” and I assure you that I did shut it – and kept it shut – especially when I was feeling inclined to start whining again.

But maybe Solomon isn’t whining at all. Maybe there’s something much deeper and more painful going on. Maybe Solomon asks the question about God’s dwelling on earth, about whether God will indeed be present among and within us, because human life far too often includes so *little* steadfast love and so *many* betrayals. Perhaps Solomon stands before the altar and in the presence of the people, all too aware of his own father’s failure to keep God’s commandments and all too aware that he, too, will fail to keep them. Perhaps Solomon stands there, aware of his own limitations and mistakes. Fearing that the answer will be, “No,” and hoping that the answer will be, “Yes,” he asks, “Will you really? Will you really be with me – with us – always?”

Now that’s a question I think most, if not all, of us can understand, even if we’re *not* closet whiners. When we take an honest look at ourselves, we see our own inability

even to follow the two commandments that Jesus called the greatest – to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Recognizing our inability to follow them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – or even just a few hours out of a single day – we can begin to fear that maybe God’s love and care are as finite as our own. We become aware of our limits in countless ways: through our struggles with alcoholism and drug addiction, through being unfaithful to our spouses, through offering envy instead of love to our neighbors, or simply through acting out our frustrations on friends, co-workers, families, or the fundraiser who telephones us while we’re eating dinner. Knowing that *we* are unable to be always loving, always wise, and always compassionate, we can begin to fear that God might be unable, too.

This doubt can also creep in and overtake our hearts because we have been betrayed and badly wounded by people who supposed to protect and care for us. Too many of us have been abused as children by relatives, family friends, or religious authorities; too many assaulted by spouses or partners; too many lied about by co-workers or friends; and too many simply not seen as the unique and beautiful creations of God that we all are.

Looking in the mirror and looking around us, we can see great love and generosity of heart, but we can also see hate and indifference and cold, barren hearts. So I think we can be forgiven if we join Solomon in his doubts and in his question, “Will you really?” We can be forgiven if we doubt the promises we hear from Hebrew scripture, from Jesus and the apostles – *and* from the pulpit – that God’s love is everlasting and steadfast.

So instead of hiding or denying our doubts, we can use them to move us to look at ourselves and one another more closely. In addition to remembering the hurts and the wounds, we remember the people who have been there for us, over and over again. We remember the times when God’s love seemed to pour through us, and the words we spoke were exactly the hopeful or healing words someone else needed to hear. We remember when we have been the compassionate companion that someone else needed in a time of crisis and despair, and we see the people who loved and cared for us when we seemed to be trying our best to be *unlovable*.

We can also let our fears that God hasn’t and won’t always dwell with us push us into looking at the wider world more closely. Exploring the past and the present, we can search for signs of God’s presence in the midst of human attempts to limit it. We can look for the white clergy who joined civil rights movement, instead of seeing only the clergy who opposed and criticized Martin Luther King. We can look for the leaders who act with wisdom and compassion, instead of seeing only the leaders who act with neither – and thus fail to lead. We can look for *and become* people who work for justice and peace, instead of seeing only those who work for domination and greed. We can look for *and become* people who, day after day, quietly care for some of God’s most wounded and forgotten people in refugee camps, hospitals, schools, and prisons. We can look for *and become* people of hope and vision.

For me, this is the beauty of the Christian understanding of God as incarnational, the beauty of the notion that God can, did, and does become incarnate, visible, *present* in flesh and blood, in the material world. Christianity proclaims that God can even be incarnate, visible, and present in and through you and me. This is one reason that Saint Benedict, several centuries ago, adopted a rule of monastic living that requires greeting

everyone, friend and enemy, neighbor and stranger, as Christ. Benedict did not say *pretend* that everyone is Christ. He said greet everyone *as* Christ, as one in whom the spirit and beauty of God dwell fully. And everyone, my brothers and sisters, includes you and me. So even though Christianity preserves a sense of God as something beyond our ability to imagine and understand completely, it also points to the love and beauty within us and all around us as an answer to our doubts, an answer to the question we ask when we cry out to God, “Will you really?”

My first year of divinity school, I heard a story that I’ve heard a number of times since. Some of you may know it, too. It is the story of a young member of a Native American people. The teenager was troubled by the clash of desires in the human heart – the desires for both peace and war, love and hate, generosity and greed. The young member sought out one of the tribal elders and asked about these conflicting desires. The elder simply nodded and said, “Yes, I, too, have two wolves in my heart, a wolf of healing and a wolf of destruction.” The teenager asked, “But which one is *stronger*?” and the elder replied, “Whichever one I feed.”

We each have our own wolf of doubt and despair and our wolf of trust and hope. Through scripture, through the lives of friends and families, and in our own hearts, God has sometimes whispered and sometimes shouted the promise to be with us always. It is an audacious promise that God calls us to trust in all its audaciousness because, by trusting it, we nourish the wolf of healing and hope.

But scripture, the lives of friends and families, and our own hearts also show us how deeply our trust and hope can be shaken and how low our supply of food for the healing wolf can become. That is one of the reasons we gather together as a community of faith on Sunday mornings, and it is one of the reasons we gather with other people of faith, as we did last night with members of Congregation Shir Shalom. We come together, sometimes shaken and running low on food. And we also come together, sometimes full of hope and with nourishment to spare. We come together, willing to encounter God’s presence in speech, in song, and in silence; willing to encounter God in and through one another.

When – not “if” –you join Solomon in his doubt that God really does dwell with us, enfolding us and all of creation in love, truth, and grace, feel free to join Solomon in his willingness to ask the question, “Will you really dwell with us, care for us, lead us into true peace?” Ask God the question, *challenge* God with the question, but then be willing to listen for the answer. The answer may come in a still, small voice that whispers, “Yes,” in your heart. It may come in the love you receive from a neighbor or a stranger. It may come in a story of courage and hope from Cloverdale or Cleveland or the Congo. Dare to ask the question, and dare to hear God’s answer. In the midst of our doubts and fears, God is indeed still speaking words of hope, words of healing, and words of peace. For that and for so much more, thanks be to God. Amen.

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