

(Era of the Tabernacle)

1 Kings 8:1-13

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – Iowa City/Coralville

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Thanks for the honor of speaking as a part of Jill’s sabbatical.

The most daunting thing Kara said to me as we were planning this was that I could “speak about anything.” In other words, I didn’t have a specific assigned topic or scripture text.

When I was a full-time pastor, I always tried to have a sermon series going; preaching through a specific book, or other macro themes. It was useful to have some “constraint.” It kept me from getting in the habit of speaking to what I felt like in that moment.

Since I don’t have that sort of guard rail to keep me on topic, I often turn to the Lectionary scripture for a given week. The lectionary, if you didn’t know, is a three-year cycle that provides a systematic reading through the bible.

I’ll admit I sometime use the lectionary sort of like a magic 8 ball to come up with sermon ideas—and today is no exception! The truth is that between the readings slated for each Sunday, there’s almost always something that has relevance for our time.

The reading I’ve selected is from 1 Kings. It is NOT random that I chose the Hebrew Bible text—I love the Old Testament, and I particularly love the historical cycle that stretches from Deuteronomy, Joshua to Judges to 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and the book of the prophet Jeremiah.

While these books are portrayed as “history,” they are actually polemic narratives—they have a specific theological and historical point of view, and they are told in a way to convey specific angles. The author or authors (might have been a “school” of writers) were probably writing during the time of the Babylonian captivity...a time when the nation was in ruins; the brightest and best hauled off to another capital; the people living under an oppressive regime. The author was actively trying to frame the distant history of their people in a way that recaptured the glory of their past and useful lessons for the time they lived in. Think of them in a way as a “national origin story” for the people of Israel, with a particular emphasis on the “glory days.”

Today’s text covers a very particular inflection point in the history of the Israelite people, but I think there is a ton of relevance to today. Let’s take a deeper look and see if you agree with me!

To get to our story today, we need to jump into the idealized history of how the Israelite people saw their past, their national myth. Recall, after the descendants of the patriarch Jacob found themselves enslaved in Egypt, the great leader Moses was called by God to lead the people in the Exodus from Egypt. After that they “wandered in the desert” for a couple generations.

While they lived as nomads, the people of Israel carried with them the Tabernacle—an elaborate tent that contained key relics of their religious history, including the Ark of the Covenant.

The ark was a sacred “box,” and it contained among other things the original stone tablets that Moses received on Mt. Sinai.

As they would move in search of pasturage for their livestock, they would move the tabernacle, and the ark, with them.

After their 40 years of wandering, they conquered the land of Canaan and shifted from a nomadic or Bedouin people to settled agriculture. That’s a huge cultural upheaval!

One of the places that cultural shift shows up is in how they see their relationship with God. Up to this point, the visible, tangible symbol of God is your holy tent, your portable God—don’t have to move any more.

In truth it’s a bit of a sad story, even in the idealized biblical books of history. It’s as if the ark falls from people’s consciousness. It is stored in private homes, moved from place to place occasionally. Eventually it is captured by the Philistines, only to be discovered later by an archaeologist from Indiana University in the 1930s. Kidding! That’s not what happened! The Philistines actually returned it—because one of the problems with the ark was that if you touched it you died; or if you looked at it; not something to be trifled with.

Today’s text marks a turning point. Under kings Saul, then David, and now Solomon, the nation has prospered beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. Solomon picks up work begun by his father David, to make a house for God. “I live in a palace, yet God lives in a tent.” The people have traded their tents for houses; they’ve planted fields rather than grazing the hillsides; they’ve become civilized—and now it’s time to “civilize” God. With great ceremony Solomon constructs a fabulous temple to house the ark—he says he’s creating a suitable home for God.

The temple of Solomon was one of the most ostentatious displays of wealth of its time. Building materials are brought in from far and wide. It was a legendary space.

This may sound sacrilegious, but I always kind of chuckle at that. That the God who raised the mountains and created the waters and sky—should walk into a manmade building, no matter how gilded and gaudy, and sit back and thinks “ahhh, I’m home!”

And indeed, Solomon's creation—a "house fit for God!"—where is it today? It's gone. Completely destroyed; the ark is lost. The temple probably was on the site where Herod built the second temple hundreds of years later. All that remains of the second temple is a few stones—the "wailing wall" in Jerusalem.

As I said, this "history" is told to convey certain truths. I think the story arc of the ark actually describes in some ways the balance we ought to seek in our relationship with God.

During their time of wandering—at the time when they were most dependent on God, even for their sustenance, the ark of God was with them. The tent is in the middle of the settlement. People see it daily, and it reminds them of God's presence. When you are living in the desert, your next meal or drink of water isn't to be taken for granted. You are constantly reminded of your own frailty, your own mortality—your dependency.

But when they moved into Canaan, they took over vineyards and olive trees and grew crops and built barns and hedged their lives against disaster. While the risk of famine was always present for ancient people, the Israelites were living in the land of milk and honey, and certainly compared to their previous history, they didn't have to worry daily about the next meal.

The people essentially forgot about the ark—it became a relic of the past. Kind of like the stuff from your grandmother's house that you remember fondly but it's been in four consecutive storage units because you don't know what to do with it. Indeed for many of us, "too much stuff" is a problem. That's a far cry from wandering in the wilderness. Abundance can cloud our sense of our need for God—and rather than the daily sense of presence, they put God on the back burner.

When times are good, it's easy to convince yourself that things are good because you work hard; because you're smart. Because you deserve them! In these times our sense of the presence of God can be elusive.

But there is another threat that this text foreshadows—one, in my mind, far more dangerous. And that is when we fashion for ourselves a dwelling place for God.

The subsequent history of the people of Israel after Solomon's temple is not a particularly good one. The text we read today was kind of the high water mark of Israel. After that, strife among the people built; kings fought against usurpers; the kingdom split into two and ultimately both were conquered. But how? They had the temple in Jerusalem! God lived there! Well instead of in the midst of the people, the settled temple created a hierarchy of people. Property values go up when your neighbor is God! Indeed, one of the causes of the split of the kingdom had to do with jealousy about who had proximity to the temple. The feud between the descendants of Judah and the

tribes who lived further North continued for hundreds of years—that's part of the basis of the grudge against Samaritans in Jesus' time!

This has obvious indications—not just for temple-building, but for how we choose to characterize God. When we let our own tastes and preferences shape how we want God to relate to us, we usually get it wrong. We read back onto God things that God never said.

It is a crazy irony to me that Christianity in the US today is in some ways at its most prosperous: churches on the scale of sports arenas are commonplace --and yet we are also in a time of historic disrespect for our fellow humans. Christians of certain political leaning have found great favor in politics, and that power corrupts. This is an old story. Moving God into the temple did not work to the advantage of the Israelites. Christianity has seen this story before: the most enduring works of Christian literature were born out of times of dire persecution, but when emperor Constantine became a Christian, overnight human squabbles boiled to the surface and it seems like the church went haywire.

This happens when we fashion a home for God; shove God into a creation of ours. We put our own prejudices and priorities in God's mouth, and we invariably create division and separation.

I hear people ascribing opinions to God and dragging God into their petty arguments—and I find their conception of God to be unrecognizable. Our public discourse today is rife with people who see to know *exactly* what God wants.

I do not have that “certainty.” I will admit that in many ways I'm wandering in the desert. The older I get, things that I “knew for sure” when I was younger are fading away. More and more I find God's truth in the uncertainty, in the questions. I like it when God is with me in my wandering. And maybe most importantly, I find God reflected in other people. With a god in a temple, we measure our relationship with reference to geography. With a god in a tent, the location is measured with respect to other persons.

I pray that we are able to avoid those two temptations: that we not put God in a corner, forget about our dependence, and rely on a false sense of our own wisdom.

But I also pray that we resist the urge to reshape God into a reflection of our own values and priorities and speak on God's behalf.

How much better would we be, if we approached God by keeping God close? May God with us—present, visible, and nearby.

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