

(What's So Funny 'Bout) Forgiveness
A Sermon on 1 Kings 8:1-13, 22-53
Proper 16
August 26, 2018

Introduction

Today's text is a dedication ceremony for the Temple, a foundational event in Israel's history. The ceremony is observed with many of the elements of Deuteronomist theology. It is the interpretive center of the long history of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. From here on, it is all downhill. The authors know that the Temple establishment does not work. The story from here on is about the collapse of that establishment. The people turn away from God and bring ruin upon themselves.

But for today, the author wants us to bask in the glory of the moment. This is Solomon's most important act. The text evokes admiration for king, temple and God.

Many of you may be glad that we are in our last week of stories about David and Solomon. There is a lot of violence in the David stories that is hard to digest. The theology of the Deuteronomist is difficult at times and seems outdated: God causes all natural disasters, if you prosper, it is a sign of blessing of God, if you are poor or suffer calamity, it is a curse from God. My hope is that by engaging these texts, we can expand our own theology.

First Move: Seeking God's Presence

Solomon assembles Israel to bring the ark to the temple. There are two elements of suspense. First, the ark is dangerous to transport. People have died from it. Second, the ark has never been in a permanent structure. We don't know if God is ready for that. We don't know if Solomon is the son of David that God had in mind when God told David that his son would build a house for God.

David had moved the ark to a tent of meeting in Jerusalem. The priests and Levites bring the ark to the Temple and place it in the holy of the holies. They open the ark and there is nothing in it but the two tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.

Everything proceeds without incident. God must be pleased with the decision to move the ark to the Temple. God is ready to dwell in a permanent structure for the first time.

When the priests come out of the Holy of Holies, a cloud fills the Temple. The author uses a collage of images for the mysterious presence of God: cloud, glory, deep darkness. These are palpable images. Glory is a translation of the Hebrew word, *kavod*, which literally means thick, heavy. It is used metaphorically to describe someone or something as weighty.

The people of Israel struggled with the same problem we do: they worshiped an invisible God. How do you describe what is invisible? The Temple is a vehicle to make visible God's presence in the community. They struggled with metaphors to embody God's presence.

Solomon says, "Yahweh has determined to dwell in thick darkness. I have built, yes, built a lofty house for you, a fixed place for you to dwell as your dwelling." These verses are part of the oldest Biblical poetry. They are likely an ancient temple song: they make presence palpable. The double use of the term dwell (*yashav*) means to sit or abide permanently, suggesting that Yahweh is there and will never leave.

Even when God's presence is described palpably, there is mystery about it. Thick darkness implies God is wrapped in mystery by a cloud.

The inauguration of the Temple is a foundational event, so there are several traditions to underscore their perspective of the event. One theological tradition affirms God's law, another God's glory and another God's hiddenness. All three traditions agree that the focus of God's earthly presence is in the temple, where the symbol of presence is the ark, a cloud of glory and thick darkness.

The text preserves tribal traditions to assert that the temple is the continuation and culmination of ancient tribal memories. This is one of the glories of the Hebrew Bible. The authors don't purge the texts of differing traditions so that they can present their own, undiluted theology. The authors weave a quilt that preserves different perspectives.

One of those traditions is that the ark does not contain God. It is empty except for the two tablets. This reasserts the Mosaic tradition that God's presence is known as commandment and Israel's responds to God's presence with obedience.

The temple is the culmination and synthesis of all that has gone before it in Israel's history. Today's text refers to the Exodus, the desert wanderings, the covenant and commandments at Sinai, the punishment for covenant disobedience, the entry into the Promised Land, the religious symbolism of the ark, and the promises to David.

Second Move: Seeking God's Forgiveness

Solomon gives a long prayer to dedicate the Temple. He begins by praising God and praising himself for being the chosen son of David who builds the Temple. Royal propaganda is part of the occasion.

The prayer recognizes the tension between the immanence and transcendence of God. Solomon asks a rhetorical question: "But will God really reside on earth?" A tradition from the heads of the tribes voices an objection to the royal theology. The claims of the palpable presence of God assert too much for them. They resolve the conflict between God's immanence and transcendence by insisting that Yahweh will remain in heaven. The Temple is where God is enthroned as the God of the people. The Temple will serve as the focal point of Israel's prayers and Yahweh will pay attention to the prayers. The temple is the place where the people gather to address Yahweh. The prayers are heard in heaven.

The problem of divine presence in these verses speak to an exile setting that left people physically separated from the temple. They are comforted to know that God will still hear their prayers in heaven even if they can't offer the prayers at the Temple.

The last 20 verses of the prayer are a long pastoral reflection on the need for forgiveness. It enumerates the archetypal cases where Israel sins and needs forgiveness.

There are seven petitions:

- vv. 31-32, disputes among Israelites when they sin against each other that require them to make oaths at the Temple's altar.
- vv. 33-34, defeat by an enemy because they have sinned against you.
- vv. 35-36, drought, when the heavens hold back, because the people have sinned against you.
- vv. 37-40, natural disasters such as famine, pestilence and locusts.
- vv. 41-43, prayer by a foreigner who comes to the land for the sake of your name and visits the Temple
- vv. 44-45, prayer for victory before battle

- vv. 46-51, prayer by exiles who were conquered because they sinned against you but now turn their hearts toward you in repentance.

The first petition between the Israelites who have sinned against each other includes only the first verb: hearken. Solomon asks God to hearken. That is an archaic. The King James Bible uses it a lot. It means pay close attention. Listen enthusiastically. Then, be the judge. Act and judge your servants. The prayer gives the judge two options: condemn or vindicate.

After the first petition, the text no longer sees condemnation as an option. The final six petitions are about vindication, acceptance, pardon and affirmation. They are a request for vindication of the unworthy. It is an appeal not for justice but for mercy.

The verbs are the same in each petition: Hearken in the heavens, that is, pay close attention from heaven and hear our prayers. Second, forgive. Instead of judging the people, forgive them. Third, restore them, heal them.

The prayers all have the same pattern. My working title for this sermon was Hearken and Forgive. Those are the verbs, the requests that the prayer makes of God.

The final petition is the longest. It speaks about repentance. Israel's only way into the future is to reverse course and embrace Torah obedience. Israel's fundamental sin is to deny its relationship with Yahweh. In this text Israel publicly acknowledges its linkage to Yahweh, its obedience to Yahweh and its reliance on Yahweh.

The petitions lead to the same result: return to Yahweh with serious intention to repent may lead to restoration and well-being. The petitions regard every calamity that befall the people as coming as a result of Yahweh's sovereignty and as an opportunity for Yahweh's forgiveness. When the people sin, they turn from God and calamity follows as punishment. Today's text embraces the tradition of the prophets, who repeatedly plead with the people to turn back to God. The hope for the people lies in change of heart or repentance.

Third Move: Seeking Restored Relationship

What ancient Israel gets that we don't get is that God is always present, always near, and that God is shaping the course of events.

We are practical atheists. We confess that we belong to the tribe of Christians, but we act as if God doesn't exist.

Seventy percent of Norwegians belong to the Church of Norway, but only 30% of Norwegians believe in God as a deity. The other 40% understand God as a force or spirit in the universe.

Mainline churches have similar splits in their worshipers. Many of us believe that we have a more subtle, contemporary understanding of God. [I am guilty of this, too. I am preaching to myself today.] We talk about God as the sacred or the force for good in the universe. We don't think of obeying God. Instead we respond to God's call. We don't need God's forgiveness. Instead we need forgiveness from our brother or our sister.

I went through several of the books in my library by contemporary theologians and only occasionally did I find Forgiveness in the index. Forgiveness is not something that many contemporary theologians think we need from God. We don't sin against God—we sin against our brothers and sisters. They are who we need forgiveness from.

When Mary and I visited the Norwegian church in Svalbard, they preserved one of the oldest Christian prayers: Kyrie, Eleison. It means, Lord have mercy, or Lord, have mercy on me. That is part of every worship service. Many people who practice centering prayer use Kyrie, Eleison as a mantra. It empties our mind. It humbles us. It helps us recognize that we are dependent on God. We need God's mercy.

Each week as part of the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." What do we mean by that? Do we really think that God needs to forgive us?

The first four commandments are about sins against God, the last six about sins against our neighbor. The last six we ask our neighbor for forgiveness. If we lie to somebody or steal from somebody, we ask them to forgive us. What about the first four? Thou shalt have not other gods before me. Thou shalt not make graven images. Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Ancient Israel believed that when the people violated these commandments, God punished them, either by causing drought or some other natural disaster or by allowing their enemies to defeat them in battle and carry them away into exile. The dominant image of sin in the Bible is as a debt that has to be paid. Punishment was understood as a way of paying the debt.

Solomon's prayer makes a move that fits with contemporary theologies. Solomon says, forgive us, don't punish us, if we turn to you and acknowledge our sins. Acknowledging our sin and turning to you takes the place of punishment. We recognize that we have done wrong. Restore us to our prior relationship with you. Return us to the land.

Today when we violate the first four commandments, we feel estranged from God, we feel alienation from God. That alienation is a sin that carries its own

consequences. We still believe that we need to repent to return to God. Repentance is still a big deal for Christians. It is the major theme of Advent and Lent each year. Christians ask for God's grace to restore the broken relationship. The indexes for some of the contemporary theology books under Forgiveness said, see Grace.

If we believe in grace, do we still need forgiveness? The lines are blurred. People today still have a sense of guilt and shame. We still feel like we are being punished or will be punished for something we have done.

Divine forgiveness and grace are about restoring our relationship with God. Forgiveness means letting go of our sins. The debt has been canceled. God will no longer hold our sins against us.

A contemporary understanding of a loving God believes that God does not give up on us, even when we sin and turn from God. God still wants to restore the relationship. The problem of guilt and shame is our response to our own sin, or what we perceive to be our own sin. Guilt and shame are a good thing if they lead to repentance, turning back to God. We want forgiveness as assurance that our sins have been canceled. We want tangible evidence that our relationship with God has been restored. It is essentially the same problem that ancient Israel had when it was coming up with palpable images of God's presence.

We still worship an invisible God. Christians believe that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. A relationship with Jesus leads us to God.

Jesus models for us that the way to God is to go to a lonely place, or lock yourself in a closet, and pray. Prayer is still the way to God, just as in the dedication of the Temple in Solomon's day.

Jesus models prayer for us in the Lord's Prayer. We ask God to forgive us, as we forgive those who sin against us. The act of asking for forgiveness is repentance. It is recognition that we have done wrong. If our repentance is sincere, we feel the pain that we have caused God by turning away from God. We feel the pain of being less than we could have been by turning toward ourselves and false idols instead of turning to God.

Repentance brings the punishment upon ourselves. It transforms us. We no longer want to cause or experience that kind of pain. God completes the transformation by showing us mercy, by restoring our relationship.

Conclusion

Today's text holds up pretty well as contemporary theology. We still have the same problems: how do we feel the presence of an invisible God? How do we restore our relationship with God?

Solomon encourages us to find God through prayer and repentance. Repentance is a confession that we are dependent on God. Kyrie, Eleison.

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