

I Kings 8

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Last week we began talking about Solomon and his wisdom. It is probably true that it is *this* period in the history of Israel that many see as the Golden Age. It was during the reign of David and Solomon—but especially Solomon—that Israel was at the height of its economic and political power. It was at its most stable and most prosperous. But is *this* what makes it a Golden Age for Israel? Is this what makes a Golden Age for any country? Is it political stability? Economic prosperity? Military strength?

We read today about Solomon's prayer of dedication after the building of Temple in Jerusalem, when the Ark of the Covenant finally finds its place in the Holy of Holies. These are big events and I could probably find ten sermons in these events alone. But what surprised me as I reflected on this week's lectionary passage, what really struck me, were those last verses that we read, "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people, Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you." Solomon uses the Hebrew word *nokri* which means a non-Israelite who is passing through; it doesn't refer to someone who has come to live in Israel but just the occasional visitor. It's impressive that Solomon should ask his God to listen to the prayers of the person who is just passing through. One wouldn't think that Solomon was that inclusive to include in this great dedicatory prayer the person who stops to pray but who may worship in far different ways than Solomon and the Israelites.

Solomon's temple lasted for about 350 years until it was destroyed by the Babylonian armies when they conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Then a Second Temple was built by Ezra and Nehemiah a century later. In the years before Jesus' birth it was extravagantly improved upon by King Herod. But the temple was destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish Rebellion 30 years after Jesus, and—to this day—has never been rebuilt. The only remains of that Temple are the supporting stones of the western wall. Those great stones are still visited in Jerusalem by Jews from all over the world and the Western Wall is considered the holiest site for people of the Jewish faith. But, just as in Solomon's day, it's not just for Jews.

We went to the Western Wall when we were in Jerusalem and watched as numerous people made their way up to the wall and—as is the custom—place small folded pieces of paper with their prayers written on them, tucking them into the cracks in the wall. There was a lot of praying but there was also a lot of singing and dancing because this is supposed to be a joyous, happy place. We even witnessed several Bar Mitzvahs. The wall, for Jewish people, is so special because it is as close as they can get to where the Temple was and where the Holy of Holies was in ancient times. This is as close as one can get to where the Ark of the Covenant was when it was housed in the Temple, the ark that was supposed to be the very footstool of God. This is as close as one can get if you want your prayers joined to those ancient prayers and sacrifices offered by priests and prophets for years upon years. To many Jews, this is the very gate of heaven and prayers spoken here go straight to the ear of God. As Solomon says in this passage, “May your eyes be open night and day toward this house . . . hear the plea of your servant and your people Israel when they pray toward this place.” --I Kings 8: 29-30

While there I became one of those *nokri*, those foreigners of whom Solomon spoke. I went down to the Western Wall and I picked up a yarmulke. They have them for all the men who want to go up and pray for one must have a covering on the head to pray there. I put it on and wrote out my prayers and then

went up to the wall. I tucked the little sheet of paper into one of the cracks between the stones, and then I covered my eyes and leaned into the stones of that holy place, and I prayed. On my little folded piece of paper I had written out prayers for the health of a Jewish friend, I prayed for the well-being of our children, and for peace. Did God hear those prayers? Did God grant the prayer of Solomon to hear the prayers of all foreigners such as me? Well, since I believe that God hears all prayers, I have no real doubt that my prayers were heard.

To me, the most important thing about Solomon's prayer was its inclusivity. Perhaps Solomon recognized that the health of the nation depends not just on its military strength or economic prosperity, but also upon the strangers, the foreigners who come into the nation. It is the encounter with the stranger that strengthens us. Is Solomon wise enough to realize that wisdom is not just seeing the connection with God, as we said last week, but that wisdom is seeing the connection between people? And so the stranger is made welcome and encouraged to come and pray. Maybe that's what makes for a nation's Golden Age, when it is secure enough to welcome the stranger.

The Middle East had another golden age, but it wasn't until Islamic civilization experienced a golden age under the Abbassid Dynasty, which ruled from the mid-eight century until the mid-thirteenth century. Under the Abbassids, Islamic culture became a blending of Arab, Persian, Egyptian, and European traditions. People came from Europe and Africa, from China and India to the Middle East. They were secure enough to welcome the stranger. The result was an era of stunning intellectual and cultural achievements.¹

Sadly when we think about the Middle East today, including Israel, inclusiveness is probably not what we think of first. In fact, so much of the constant warring comes from the intractable notion that the

stranger is threatening, different from us and therefore dangerous. It is particularly frustrating when we consider that Israel—as a nation with its own borders—came on the heels of one of the darkest periods in history. When distrust of those who are different led to heinous acts of extermination in Nazi Germany.

But, you know, Germany wasn't always like that. In fact, there was a time when it was quite the opposite, Germany experienced its Golden Age, more commonly referred to as the German Enlightenment. Germany in the nineteenth century was a time of reason and welcoming of other cultures, whether they be French, or Russian, or strange as it may seem to us today, Jewish. Many diverse peoples found a welcome in German-speaking lands and the country of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Kant, and Goethe became “enlightened.” The German term for the Enlightenment is *Aufklärung*. In the German, this word implies not only a lighting up of the world, but also a sense of something becoming clear. To those caught up in the spirit and excitement of the Enlightenment, it was as though a fog was lifted. The world was brighter and clearer. To them, it must have seemed as if the days of darkness, ignorance and superstition, were finally being consigned to the history books. The world was coming alive, leading ultimately, they thought to a better, more fulfilled human existence.²

Not everyone thinks diversity is a good thing. Perhaps that is what we are seeing in Afghanistan, and in other countries also. It seems when looking at the span of human history and civilization, we've seen times of enlightenment when a culture is characterized by its openness to diversity and we've certainly seen times when a nation or a culture is captured by its own fear. In truth, all cultures, throughout history, are caught in the tension of these two opposing forces and as we witness in our nation, this is no less true for us.

A community's success is dependent on how well it values the diversity of its constituents. I would say that is true for a church as well. I would say that inclusivity happens along the margins of our life

together, in the places where we are not always so comfortable. And that's where growth happens: emotional, physical, and spiritual growth. It is certainly when we come in contact with the "other," with someone different from us that we are pushed to examine ourselves.

For several years, we have consistently emphasized that we hope our church is one where everyone is welcome, where each person is valued, and where all of our gifts work together to build up the community of faith, working hard at being welcoming of everyone, and hoping to use each one's gifts and talents for the building up of all, no matter their abilities or color or gender or background.

We live in a world that is too scattered, too separated. Solomon's prayer for inclusivity is one that we need to hear. So, if wisdom is seeing the connections between things, between people, the questions come to us: are we really connected, are we really wise? Can we understand the concerns of the person whose political beliefs are different from ours? Are we able to catch the anxiety of the homeless person who knows that winter is not all that far off and he really doesn't know what he's going to do? Can we feel the fears of the person whose race is different and who is afraid in a country where most people are not of that color? Can we feel the despair of the one who is bullied because her sexual orientation or gender expression is not what her school or her family or her community thinks it should be? As their hearts turn to heaven, God hears their prayers. Do we? Do we know that whatever they call themselves they are children of God just as we are? We read from Psalm 84 today in our call to worship, "*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.*" Perhaps when we recognize that God's abiding place is not just in the Temple of old, but with us, and not just with us, but with the stranger God sends to us, maybe then we can hear each other's hopes and fears, and love each other, forgive each other. That's when we can live in love, of ourselves, our neighbors, the stranger or foreigner, that's when our golden age will be.