Sermon – Strength to Strength
Sunday, August 25, 2024
Scripture Readings – I Kings 8:22-30, 41-42, John 6:58-69
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Our first scripture reading is I Kings 8:22-30 and 41-43. I Kings 8 begins with Solomon gathering the people at the newly constructed temple, and the priests bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the inner sanctuary. Today's reading is Solomon's prayer at the dedication and a plea for tolerance, inclusion, and respect for the foreigner within this temple. The completion of the temple was the pinnacle of his reign during the 10th century BCE. This is the first of three consecutive temples built on the same site which today houses the Muslim Shrine, the Dome of the Rock. Let us open our hearts and minds to the Word of God.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands to heaven. He said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. Therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, "There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive…. "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, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 6:58-69. The bread of life discourse found in John's gospel concludes with a powerful affirmation of faith by Simon Peter to Christ. *We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.* The belief at the heart of our faith, that God would choose to dwell among us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is not uncontroversial. There is division among the followers of Christ in today's reading. Theologian James Newsome contends the difficulty may have more to do with Christ's invitation to participate in his death than misreading the bread metaphor as an invitation to literally eat Christ's flesh. Hear now God's Holy Word.

This 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." Jesus said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were

complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But 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. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Strength to Strength"

The Text: Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion. They go from strength to strength. Psalm 84:5, 7a

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for choosing to dwell among and within us, whether in the beauty of the sanctuary of your creation, in the loveliness of temples, churches and cathedrals, or in the wonder and mystery of the One who came to us as the Bread of Life. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday Peter and I worshiped at the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Funchal, Madeira. I had the privilege of bringing greetings on behalf of Westminster who welcomed and encouraged Presbyterian refugees from Madeira in 1849. St. Andrew's was founded in the 1860's and grew out of the ministry of the Rev. Dr. Robert Kalley, Scottish Presbyterian Minister and physician, who built a hospital and 17 schools on the Island of Madeira in the 1830's and 40's transformed thousands of lives by teaching them to read from imported Portuguese Bibles before he and his followers were driven from the island by the Roman Catholic Church who wanted to control and contain the worship of God. One hundred fifty of these Presbyterian Refugees found their way to Springfield, IL in 1849, the new state capitol and home of Abraham Lincoln where they were free to worship with fellow Presbyterians.

Worshipping with our Madeiran brothers and sisters last Sunday was a poignant time to marvel together at the strength and dignity of those who came before us and how our stories are united in the Body of Christ through the grace of God. Whether one considers the strength of those who were forced to leave their home and travel the highways of Zion or the strength of those who welcomed them and provided a new home in a foreign land, each went from strength to strength.

As the congregation sang Holy, Holy, Holy and recited the Lord's Prayer in Portuguese, there was a bond that united us along with a sense of awe and reverence for the God who cannot be contained. God transcends language, culture and time, and brings people together in ways larger than we can imagine. When Rev. Jorge Gameiro pointed out that their roof is in the shape of an upside-down ark, a smile came across my face as I considered the upside-down ark within our beautiful sanctuary. We find safety in the ark of our Creator God who cannot be contained, yet, who chooses to dwell in each of our sanctuaries, among us and within us.

Today's scripture reading highlights the dedication of Solomon's temple, a culminating event in the life of the Israelite people and one more validation that God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, dwelt among them.

The ark of the covenant, which was placed in the holiest part of Solomon's temple was built by skilled artisans during the time Moses led the Hebrew people in Sinai before entering the Promised Land and was housed in the tabernacle or sacred tent which served as Israel's portable sanctuary prior to this symbolic placement in the holiest inner sanctuary of the temple. The tablets of the law were contained in the Ark of the Covenant. This was the center of their worship and provided a reassuring sense of God's presence and leading.

Knowing how far and for how long the Ark of the Covenant traveled with the Israelite people, reminding and reassuring them of Yahweh's presence, makes its final placement into the holiest part of Solomon's temple especially climactic and meaningful. This was the homecoming for which they had longed and waited for centuries.

When the Ark is placed in its new home, the importance of the moment is confirmed by a sign from God. A cloud which is equated with the "glory of God" permeates the temple. This darkness wraps the temple in the mystery of God's presence. Yahweh's own presence comes to reside in the temple dedicated to the worship of Israel's God. The temple is not only beautiful, it is the one place, above all others, were God is to be found.

And yet, as Solomon affirms, who can contain the transcendent majesty that is Yahweh? Neither the earth nor the heaven, including the highest heaven is great enough. Surely this building of cedar and costly stones, splendid though it is, cannot contain Yahweh. No, Yahweh is uncontainable.

As much as Solomon's prayer of dedication affirms God's presence within worship in a tangible and lovely way, with the people of God who are gathered, wise Solomon also criticizes a too exclusive and limited understanding of God. The God who chooses to be present in worship cannot be limited to Solomon's temple or any sanctuary. God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the weak and strengthens the powerless. Thus, God is potentially present to all people in all places, and those in worship who know this fact have a responsibility to communicate the lovely generosity and mercy of God's presence beyond the sanctuary walls.

As the story of our Judea-Christian faith unfolds, we are introduced to yet another dimension of God's dwelling place in the wonder and mystery of the person of Jesus Christ. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, God chose the unimaginable, God chose to dwell within our humanity, to become one of us in order to raise us up to be all we can be.
In Christ, we (along with Simon Peter) have come to believe and to know the Holy One of God.

The paradox of our faith is that the uncontainable God who is beyond our understanding and our grasp has chosen to dwell within us in the intimacy of our lives.

The paradox of our faith journey is that we grow stronger in times of difficulty and challenge, whether the Israelites in the wilderness, the followers of Christ in Capernaum, the Madeira refugees in Springfield, Illinois, or twenty-first century Christians and the cultural, personal, religious, and political challenges before us today.

By the grace of God, may we each go from strength to strength. In the darkness and the light, may we always find Christ near us, Amen.