THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

August 22, 2021

##### *“A House of Prayer”* 1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43

 The passage we have just heard is from a very hopeful and wonderful time in the life of the ancient Israelites. King David, unfortunately, has been dead for many years now, but (just as he had hoped and intended) his son, Solomon, has succeeded him on the throne. God’s promise has been fulfilled and a son of David has taken his place.

More than this, Solomon has done for God what his father had wanted to do but was prevented from doing by God. Just as God had ordained, it is Solomon who has built a Temple for the Lord. Solomon, the king who has made such a wonderful beginning with God by asking for wisdom to rule, rather than power or riches, it is Solomon who has been given the honor of providing a place for God’s presence to rest in the midst of the people.

The passage we heard is from the celebration that attended the completion of the Temple. It has taken eleven years, but it is finally done. It is now ready to be occupied. The only thing left to do is to move the Ark of the Covenant into it. And so Solomon and the assembly gather and pray as the Ark is brought forward.

Now, the ark was no ordinary piece of furniture as we all know; it was the place where the very presence of the Lord within the midst of the people of Israel within this holy structure. *C*herubim, carved representations of scary winged creatures, covered the ark and formed a throne for the Lord’s glorious presence—a presence that was too glorious to describe but which was denoted by a smoky cloud, signifying God’s overwhelming presence. This is what filled the Temple and was meant to be prodigious and awe-inspiring.

We have heard of God’s presence being like a thick cloud before, in Exodus, when God was honored with the building of a tabernacle. God’s glory, upon the completion of the tabernacle, had descended just like this: a thick cloud of smoke. Like Moses, even God’s priests could not remain when God’s presence was settled on the Ark. Once again, the mortals—those who had come to serve—had to leave the inner Sanctuary when God’s presence rested upon it and within it.

In the presence of God’s glory, and before all the people and other dignitaries in Israel, Solomon begins his prayer of blessing and gratitude to God for having brought them this far, for having kept God’s holy word to the people and to him.

The most amazing part of this prayer is the last part, which looks beyond God’s people Israel to a time when even foreigners will come in to pray in the Temple to honor the name of the God of Israel. Indeed, what Solomon describes is the goal that *“all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you.”* [v.43] This is to be a place for all peoples and the suggestion is that this God is also the God who will welcome all peoples.

This is what has been put on to Solomon’s heart and made it his goal for this First Temple. This is also the goal that will be echoed thousands of years later in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus rids of the Second Temple of merchants and moneychangers. He drives them out saying, ‘Is it not written, *“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?”* [Mark 11:17]

It is worth noting that even as he dedicates the Temple to being the most sacred of places where he, and all of Israel, *and* all others may come to draw close to God, even as he does this, Solomon expresses his concern as to whether the structure will do that which it is supposed to do. “Will God indeed dwell upon the earth?” he asks. (v. 27). In so asking, Solomon acknowledges and expresses the concern that no structure can truly contain the uncontainable.

Still, Solomon’s blessing and prayer are designed to remind Israel not only of the purpose of this Temple but of the purposes of God to all people, not just to the people of Israel. Even the “foreigner” not of the land of Israel who *“comes from a distant land because of your name … and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner asks 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”* [vv. 41-43].

Unfortunately, that First Temple no longer exists, and only a remnant of the Second Temple remains in Jerusalem.

For the single-minded purest, this *could* mean that there is no longer a place or a way to draw close to God; no place to pour out our hearts to God and receive God’s blessing and assurance of care.

Our good news, and the good news for many is that the remnant of the Second Temple—known as the Western Wall—still stands. As such, it draws hundreds and hundreds of people every day who pray and worship, but there is more: *our* good news is that God’s love has also been given to us in Christ whose body has become the new Temple—the body that was resurrected after his crucifixion and which ascended to the right hand of God to live and dwell for all eternity—this is the Temple that also gathers all people to him. So, Christ is our *House of Prayer* and the location to which we focus all our worship and offers all our prayers. We need not look further.

Most of the time, of course, you and I come here to this place—this Sanctuary at 2651 Pali Highway. When the bell is tolled for us on Sunday morning, we wait expectantly, as the candlelighters walk down the center aisle. They carry-in the light of Christ. It comes in from the world, and into the Sanctuary, where it lights the candles…but only for a little while.

The light of Christ dwells here among us while we gather and worship. However, at the end of worship, the light is gathered up once more on to the candlesticks and taken back out into the world—out where we live with Christ and each other…out in the world.

What this says to me is that this is where we are supposed to be, also. We are meant to find our place of worship and prayer *out in the world*.

It is in the world, among all of God’s beloved people, where we will find and pursue our mission as a missional people, and as a missional church. We will find our place of worship and prayer in places and among people who are in those places where darkness and death strive for dominance.

This is where the light of Christ needs to go. This is where the light of Christ longs to go. This is where we must take our prayers and our worship, and the good news is that these good things—that is, our desire to pray and to worship—these good things can, and *should* be fashioned into every blessed thing that is needed.

So, sometimes our prayers will be fashioned into the form of food donated to Foodbank or taken directly to people. Each can of food will be our prayer that it will fill an empty stomach thereby giving the whole person hope and the assurance that someone else cares—that God’s love has inspired generosity and awareness.

Sometimes our worship will take the form of sharing with the larger community our campus—making this a place of welcome, a place where people know they can come to meet for recreational sports and for exercise, perhaps for something like language classes, or other kinds of education, for benevolence groups offering counseling, job training, or even for music recitals and concerts. This house, this campus can and may be a place where people will meet to learn new ways to nurture the earth, or will come here to meet with others who are advocating for earth friendly laws and practices.

We can and should be a place where people may come to have sacred conversations about racism, or other forms of violence and how to prevent them. This should be a place that can and should be a place where such conversations can take place and all who come will know that this is a safe place to speak, to be heard, so that we may learn from each other and *about* each other.

Thus, it will even be a place that will be known in the community—we can and will be *known*. NCC—we will be that place where anyone and everyone will know that they can come and someone will be here to pray for them.

Of course, you and I know what we have known all along, that a house is more than four walls and a roof. A house is that place where the life of Christ dwells. And if Christ lives there, then the house becomes a place where prayers become intention, and then *transformed* into tangible gestures of love and caring.

Friends, long ago Solomon prayed a blessing and a hope that the newly completed Temple would be a place where all people would come and know God. *All* people. Today, this church stands in a similar place—we, too, are a house of prayer, a house where God may be pleased to dwell because it is a house that is open and ready to bless others in God’s name, ready to be what it has always been and to be it more fully than ever. We are God’s house of prayer. And so my prayer for us is that God continue to bless us as we pursue more and more ways to bless and worship and pray for God’s beloved. May this be so. Amen.