

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

SOLOMON: WISE (YES), SINNER (YES), SAINT (NO EVIDENCE).

Second Sunday after Pentecost

1 King 8:22-23, 41-43

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

22 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. 23He 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,

41 'Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name 42—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, 43then 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.

Author's Note: This text needs to be interpreted not only in light of the whole of Chapter 8, but of Solomon's life as a whole (1Kings 2-11). The biblical assessment of his personhood and reign is mixed: some regarded him as Israel's greatest sage (see 10:23-25), others as a self-serving tyrant who disregarded God in the worst way (see 11:9-13). This mixed assessment is expressed in the above title: "Solomon: Wise (Yes), Sinner (Yes), Saint (No Evidence)." For an excellent read on the historical details and theological ambiguities that pervade the

biblical accounts of Israel's monarchy in general see John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Second Edition, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969. For the material on Solomon, specifically, the time period of this text, see pages 206-224.

DIAGNOSIS: The God who "Keeps Covenant": Solomon the Sinner Standing before the Ark of the Covenant

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Solomon Breaking Covenant in his Vocation as King: Blurring the Boundaries between Kingship and Temple

The immediate context is the dedication of the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem by Solomon. It is an event saturated with impressive piety—with ceremony, speeches, and prayers. On the surface, it appears that things are coming together well for King Solomon and Israel. He was the second-generation king of the newly conceived Davidic dynasty whose legitimacy rested in the boast of being "chosen" by God. But what does that mean? Therein lies the problem. The problem is that the notion of "choseness" was combined with a theology of kingship that was filled with distortion and untruth. The new "modern" (10th century, BCE) centralized monarchy may have represented the "best" form of government conceived thus far (by the pagan world) for replacing the unstable, inefficient, and ineffectual tribal system that preceded it (Bright, pp. 218-221). But was this political system and dynasty really part of God's ultimate promise for securing Israel's future and relationship to God? Recall both Samuel's own words of warning about the monarchy at its inception (1 Samuel 8:4-22) – words easily forgotten! , and the present reality on the ground: Solomon's harsh slave labor policies that built the temple, his favoring a wealthy commercial elite to increase his treasury, and his creation of an absolutist political court that paralleled Israel's powerful neighbors. The new temple also represented this "modern" yearning for centralization. The competition between multiple

high altars (corrupted, to be sure, by local priesthoods) was now being eliminated in favor of one centrally controlled temple under the jurisdiction of the King and under the pretense of thereby keeping the worship of Yahweh pure. But was that centralization of Israel's cult God's ultimate plan for securing Israel's future and relationship, especially in light of the fact that in the bowels of the Temple, the Holy of Holies (8:6), rested the Ark of the Covenant containing only the stone tablets of Moses and nothing else from God (8:9)? And there is this irony as well, as Bright notes (p. 213): the architect of the temple was Tyrian and its artistic symbolism and cultic focus was Phoenician in origin (p. 214). On the surface, then, what is most problematic about this scene is the blurring of boundaries between monarchy and temple, politics and religion.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Solomon Breaking Covenant in His Heart: Blurring the Boundaries between God and Self

Of course, the blurring of the boundaries between Kingship and Temple is not only a matter of political and social policy; way before that was Solomon's problem of the heart where he blurs the boundary between God and himself. To be sure, King Solomon would never be as dogmatically brazen as his Near Eastern counterparts about the divine privilege of kingship. They flatly equated themselves with god. Nevertheless, the presumption of divine privilege certainly lurks within his mind. The universal whisperings of that ancient serpent, a symbol of Near Eastern wisdom, "you can be like God" (Gen. 3:5), turns him in-on-self as it does all humanity. Most telling of this blurring of the heart here, I think, is the series of "I" statements Solomon uses about himself in the opening words of the ceremony (note, especially, 8:20-21). He (mis)interprets God's (admittedly) cryptic promise to David (2 Samuel 7) in absolutist and self-serving ways by asserting himself, along with his accomplishment

of building the Temple, as the fulfillment of God's promise to David. Whatever else might be said of wise Solomon, here he certainly lacks the good-sense humility that characterized his father David when he was given the promise through Nathan (see again 2 Samuel 7).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The God Who "Keeps Covenant"

But ironically, the very God to whom Solomon is dedicating the Temple is also the biggest obstacle to Solomon's—and Israel's—heart's desire. To be sure, in his prayer of dedication "wise" Solomon does get this much right: "there is no God like the God of Israel..." and that this God does "keep covenant." But what does this mean? In light of the fact that the covenant referred to here is the one Moses delivered to the people carved in stone, the only one that Moses placed in the ark of the covenant, and the only one that Solomon is placing as the center of focus (in the Holy of Holies) in the temple, it spells bad news for covenant breakers (sinners), like Solomon. The very structure of Solomon's prayer asserts this as he lists all the ways the people of Israel sin (meaning "break covenant"): they sin against their neighbor (8:31-32), sin against God (vv. 33-40), or sin against the foreigner (vv. 41-43). But note: reference to the King as a sinner is conspicuously, hubristically, foolishly absent in this list. No "I" as sinner is mentioned; only "they" as sinners. Even so, in what is either an interesting bit of prophetic irony by Solomon or the insertion of a post-exilic redactor of the text, Israel's exile, the end of the Davidic dynasty, is foreshadowed as part of the punishment of God as "covenant keeper" upon Israel as "covenant breaker." The covenant of law that God made with Israel on Sinai—and, now, with its kings—shows no political or personal favoritism. No one whom this God raises up with the covenant of stone should think that they cannot also be brought down by that

covenant, whether Israelite or foreigner. For that is the very purpose of the covenant of stone and the meaning of God as covenant keeper.

PROGNOSIS: The God Who “Keeps Steadfast Love”: Solomon’s Hope, If Only He Could See It

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Other Covenant with Israel—Steadfast Love and Forgiveness

Interwoven into Solomon’s prayer of dedication is a contradiction. On the one hand, Solomon rightly praises and fears the God of Israel who “keeps covenant” by punishing sin; on the other hand, he desperately needs and longs for that same God to be a God who “keeps steadfast love” by forgiving sin. A God who both punishes sins and forgives sins—how is that possible? That’s a contradiction. And yet, thanks be to God, Solomon’s God is big enough to reconcile this contradiction. Not only does God “keep covenant” by punishing sinners, but this same God imaginatively transcends that covenant by making another, new covenant of “steadfast love” whereby God forgives sinners. This other covenant is the covenant that God made with Abraham, that he reiterated to David, and that he ultimately fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Unlike the covenant of stone, the covenant to Abraham sets up no political dynasty, draws no ethnic boundaries, and transcends all ethical codes. It is not rooted in Abraham’s genetic stock or David’s political dynasty, but in God’s promise to take matters into God’s own hands. This — God does ingeniously in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, he is the “steadfast love” of God acting on behalf of sinners! On the cross Jesus the Son steadfastly and lovingly interposes himself between the God who “keeps covenant” and the sinners it punishes, joining them in punishment and death, so that in his resurrection he might transcend “covenant keeping” with “steadfast love”: the forgiveness of sin and the promise of a loving and steadfast future with God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Repentance and the Steadfast Love of God

Not sacrifices made in temples, not arduous works done in response to the commandments carved in stone, and not presumptuous assertions to divine privilege because of our station in life, but true repentance is what characterizes the heart of those who walk in God's covenant of steadfast love and forgiveness. True repentance is not the same as sorrow over the punishment I have coming because of wrongdoing. Rather, true repentance, as the Augsburg Confession describes it, is a matter of true contrition and true faith. It consists of true sorrow over the offense I am to God and others which is the fruit of true faith in God's steadfast love, the promise to forgive sinners "for his own sake," which we now know as "for Christ's sake" because of his death and resurrection. Therefore, repentance is the recognition that "I am not God," but, instead, "I am the one who needs God"; it means saying "No" to the whisperings of the ancient serpent because of the "Yes" God says to me in the forgiveness of my sins. Reading through both 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, from what I can tell, Solomon, unlike his father David, never uttered a word of repentance, even though he spoke of it in his prayer of dedication (8:35-36; 38-40; 47-51). That's worth pondering a bit. What makes for wisdom and what makes for repentance seems to be two different things.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living the Distinction between Keeping Covenant and Steadfast Love

As king, Solomon certainly has an important vocational role to play in God's work of "keeping covenant" with his people. But now he has to distinguish being king from being God; now he knows the difference between God's work of "keeping covenant" and God's steadfast love. As the highest ranking political minister of the law in Israel, Solomon is responsible to use the

checks and balances of the old covenant to promote the general welfare, to protect the weak from the strong, and ensure domestic tranquility. He uses his office of king not for self-serving purposes, but for God-pleasing purposes. In addition, as king, he is also to insure that everyone has access to the "worship" of God: not just Israelites, but also foreigner (vv. 41-43). Why? Because everyone, including the king, is ultimately accountable to the God who "keeps covenant." There are no divinely privileged stations in life. But the king does not only relate to God as covenant-keeper. In that relation he will find himself sorely, but rightly punished. He will also relate to God through his promise of steadfast love, the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the king will be a leader who leads by repentance and faith in the forgiveness of sins. As I said above, I see no evidence in Solomon's story of 1 Kings where he was this kind of king. His father David was, but not Solomon. From this I guess we can draw one conclusion: The only thing rarer than a wise king, is a repentant one.