

While I've been away on sabbatical, the lectionary has offered up some powerful readings! As it happens, today we are wrapping up some long sequences: five weeks from chapter 6 in the Gospel of John (dropped into year of Mark); seven weeks' reading through the first century Letter to the Church at Ephesus; and an 11-week run of ancient Israel's transition from tribal confederacy to unified kingdom, hearing stories of Saul, Israel's first king; David, celebrated as her greatest; and now Solomon, David's son and successor. (1 and 2 Samuel, and 2 Kings)

You've heard excellent sermons on these all summer from Robin and David. If you've missed any of them, by all means go to the website or ask for paper copies! I won't rehash or try to summarize, but will jump right in with Solomon, who first came up in last week's readings, and has only two weeks in the lectionary.

There's not as much in scripture, about Solomon as about David or Saul. (1 Kings 2-11) In contrast to the stories of David and Saul, much of what is there is pretty dry. We read about his wealth and fame, but much more about his administration, how many officials he had and what they were in charge of; also, in great detail about his building projects: dimensions, materials, furnishings, and how much it all cost.

Even if none of that is familiar, we do feel we know Solomon, though. His reputation for unparalleled wisdom has come down to us. The story of his judgment between two women, each of whom claimed an infant son as her own, is well known, even to people who have never read the Bible. (1 Kings 3:16-28). He is also known for his great wealth. Jesus himself alluded to it, 900 years after Solomon's death, when he said of the lilies of the field, "Not even Solomon, in all his glory, was arrayed like one of these." (Lk. 12:27)

Wisdom, wealth, glory, what king could ask for more? And, with Solomon, who "sat on the throne of his father,"—though he did have a new throne of ivory made for himself—and whose "kingdom was firmly established," Israel itself was finally firmly established in the land.

Who would have guessed that Solomon's heart would turn away from the Lord? That the Lord would then vow to tear the kingdom from him, give it to Solomon's *servant*, and promise to establish *that man's* line forever, on the same condition as the promise to David: that he and his descendants walk in the ways of the Lord. (See, 1 Kings 11:9-13, 20-40) That, indeed, after Solomon's death the unified kingdom built up by Saul and completed by David would be torn apart into two rival kingdoms: Israel in the north, made up of ten of the original tribes, and Judah in the south, with two. As it happened.

The signs are there from the beginning, with Solomon. Yes, he asked the Lord at the outset for "an understanding mind to govern your people . . ." and he was wise. The

Lord loved him, from his birth; and he loved the Lord. He had a lot going for him; but also something very powerful going against him, the very thing going for him: his kingdom was firmly established. Even his unparalleled wisdom and wealth could not save him from a powerful hidden force.

Solomon's father, David, and Saul before him, had known the precariousness of their situation and that of the people, their dependence on the Lord. Solomon was "born to the purple." Not that he inherited the throne without intrigue and bloodshed—he killed his elder brother who had decided to exalt *himself* by making himself king. Sons of kings do seem to have a very hard time with humility, and dependence on the Lord!—But it was David (with a decided nudge from Solomon's mother, Bathsheba) who chose Solomon as his successor and sent the priests to anoint him. That is, it was not the Lord. We're seeing the establishment of the human institution here, hereditary succession, not bound quite as tightly or intimately, perhaps, to the source of all power, who is God.

Saul and David were kings in period of transition from tribal system to unified state. Things were rough around the edges. Constant battles with foreign tribes as they tried to expand and secure a kingdom. They were heroes, had lots of loyal followers, bands of men who fought with them. They loved and were loved, were close to the people, passionate men.¹

Solomon had supporters and allies—many of them foreign, more about that later—but not the same passion. His main work was building construction. Maybe that could inspire passion, but not in his case, anyway. He was the king, he was judge over the people, and not one of them. They existed to serve him, his projects, and the kingdom.

The grand temple he built for the Lord, and his own even grander house and administrative buildings, were built not by paid or volunteer labor, but foreign slaves, *and* by conscripted labor—that is, forced labor—of his own subjects. Chillingly reminiscent of Pharaoh's building his cities in Egypt with Israelite slave labor, before the Exodus.

The tradition is impressed by Solomon, but also ambivalent about all this control. Even Solomon himself says, about the temple, "will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven . . . cannot contain him, much less this house that I have built." Was Solomon trying to contain and control even God?

His other work construction work was making his kingdom even more secure, through foreign alliances and building up his wealth. He had 700 wives, many of them

¹An example, not included in the lectionary, is the story of David out with his army, longing for some of the water of Bethlehem, where garrison of Philistines were encamped. Three of David's men broke through their camp and brought water to David. He would not drink, but "poured it out to the Lord: "Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" (2 Sam. 23:17). Who would not love such a king, who loved his people so?

foreign, among them the daughter of Pharaoh; and he had 300 concubines. The list of what it took to feed his household for one day is staggering; all of it had to be provided by his officials, each of them responsible for one month each year. (1 Kings 4:22-28) Solomon seems to have worked too hard at his security through his foreign alliances—and not only in the bedroom. Not only did he build altars for the gods of his wives, but he himself followed the Phoenecian goddess Astarte.

Back in the day, when the elders of Israel first demanded “a king to govern us like the other nations,” the Lord had warned them: “He will take . . . he will take . . . he will take . . . he will take”: your sons, the best of your fields and vineyards, cattle and donkeys, your daughters, your slaves, your flocks. (1 Samuel 8:

The king will take. He will forget that, like everyone else, everything he has has been given by God. Even David and Saul, who were so close to God, continually in consultation and conversation, had forgotten themselves and God at times, overtaken by the position, power, and prerogatives of the king. David’s most famous taking, of course, was of his neighbor’s wife, Bathsheba, followed by arranging for her husband’s life to be taken, to cover up David’s sin.

We tend to think of this sort of blind, uncontrolled *hubris* in political leaders and other public figures in terms of personality and character. And, yes, they, as we, will sometimes forget that we are not our own makers, in our human weakness, desire, ambition, and hungers for more than we have been given.

But there is also something more at work, that can drive and control even a king: the innate dynamic of kingship itself, the drive of the institution to secure itself as a system, its life and survival, and to do so whatever the cost.

In this, kingship and kingdoms are like other human institutions. They tend to keep on moving in the direction they are going, with the ethos and patterns laid down. Invisible forces often seem to inhabit and drive human systems and institutions, even under new leaders; even when confronted with needs for reform and transformation that are widely recognized.

Think of the persistent partisanship in Congress, that everyone vows to change, but never can. Or the health care system. NPR commentator Nina Totenberg² described it the other day as “like the human back—it has too many moving parts.” Or all the efforts to clean up the pollution of the Chesapeake Bay.

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” the author wrote to the Church at Ephesus, “but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness” He also named the devil, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places to describe what

²During “Inside Washington,” on PBS , Friday, August 21, 2009.

is at work: invisible, spiritual forces that it will take an even stronger Spirit to resist, and transform.

The language may sound spooky and irrational, but what the letter is naming is deep in our tradition. The devil is a mythological personification of something very real, albeit spiritual and largely invisible: the force that aims to undo the kingdom, or realm, of God, all its purposes and works. At the deepest level, we are not struggling with personalities or human failures, but something much bigger.

In baptism, we renounce “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God,” as well as “the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” We renounce these *before* renouncing the “sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.” (BCP 302). In preparing candidates and sponsors for baptism, I ask people what some of these forces are. Racism, fascism, religious and ethnic hatreds are named, as well as the kind of destructive spirits that can inhabit a system, from the regime of a brutal dictator, to the smallest company or office, or even a family system.

We know about destructive patterns and behaviors that get passed down from one generation to another, one group of leaders and members to another—not through careful instructions on how to be dysfunctional or oppressive, but as if by osmosis. These patterns can be so hard to name, and even harder to change, because the spiritual forces at work, often are bigger and stronger than the personalities involved. “It’s in the ground water,” we may say

“Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh.” For the Church at Ephesus, under the thumb of the Roman Empire, the enemy was *not* the Romans. They did not have to hate the Romans or try to overpower them to be safe. In fact, that was the very thing they could *not* safely do, not without being taken over by the same corrupting spirit of empire that survived by domination and control, with force and fear.

“Take up the whole armor of God,” that’s right here, at hand. Spiritual armor to withstand spiritual forces, without and, undoubtedly, within, as well. The same spiritual armor that enabled Jesus to withstand attacks of all kinds, and not respond with domination, force or fear.

Of course, it is not always as clear for us as for Jesus just which *is* the belt of truth or breastplate of righteousness. We wouldn’t want to end up relying solely on ourselves, making our own truth. But, then, we wouldn’t want to end up paralyzed, either, never daring to put on our feet whatever we need to go out and proclaim the gospel of peace.

There is a lot more that could be said about this, a lot more thinking, praying, listening and discerning. And that’s why we are here, in community, not trying to stand on our own. The whole letter to the Ephesians is in the plural, addressed to the Church. Discerning and standing firm against the forces in our lives that would undo us, that would undo our trust in God’s power is an undertaking for the whole Church, the whole Body of Christ—a communal undertaking.

Even Solomon, in all his wisdom and glory, was not able to manage it on his own.