

August 26th, 2018

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1 Kings 8: 1,6,10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Rev. Sharon Smith

Liturgy: Experiencing the Wonder and Freedom of God

Objectives:

- To celebrate the Mystery and the Freedom of God
- To grow in our awareness of our human propensity for power, control and knowledge
- To humbly open ourselves to the love and mystery of God and be surprised by the God we didn't expect in familiar places.

Introduction:

"Freedom", Arthur shouted.

"God's freedom to be God without a single restraint"

"God's utter liberty to be the wild and free God".

Arthur spoke these words as a Golden Eagle swooped close to his head.

It was a Sunday morning and instead of attending Church, Arthur and his partner Ellen were climbing a mountain.

And while they climbed, they were playing a family game.

Known as the Divine Game of Pinzatski.

A game Arthur and Ellen Pinzatski had invented and a game they played once a year on the week they went camping.

One of them would point out a natural object or creature and the other would be challenged to state what of God was being expressed through it.

As a couple, they valued metaphor and analogy as a way to express their experience of God.

Sunsets expressed the rest and tranquility of God that simultaneously blazed with passion; flowers expressed God's extravagance, gentleness and attention to detail; and ants expressed something of God's weakness and God's ability to do big things quietly.

The Divine Game of Penzanski. Try it sometime.

A game where the very sight of eagles opens up a whole new way of experiencing the wonder and freedom of God.

As humans, we are inclined to try and contain God.

To try to lock God into fixed categories, words, images, and symbols.

We are by nature hoarders – that is, holding onto what we have already experienced.

We build monuments around God. We expect to meet God in the same way over and over again. On the terms of our past.

Yet, God's Spirit invites us on a wild ride of trust.

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Where new things are constantly being revealed for us to enjoy and experience.

17th century mystic Angelus Silesius wrote:

“God is not now, not here.

I reach for God.

And see God disappear”

God can never be fully grasped or contained.

(In Dorothee Soelle, The Silent Cry)

And grasping was **one of** King Solomon’s biggest errors.

Our first reading, from the book of Kings is a multilayered text.

It is not one person’s account of history, but the text is a national interpreted History, that occurred centuries after the events of which it tells.

The people of Israel in the 6th century BCE were exiled in Babylon.

Many had been forcefully removed from their home land (the City of David that our reading spoke of), some had witnessed Solomon’s temple being pillaged and burnt to the ground.

The temple that was their National pride and their religious nucleus.

Exiled in Babylon, weeping by the rivers. Too sad to even sing or make music.

This was the vantage point from which they wrote this story – it is a perspective of suffering, of loss.

The remnant of the nation remembers and reviews their history of life, during the reign of David’s son, King Solomon.

What a complex, multi-layered reading!

It contains a celebration and dedication of their new Temple, alongside royal political campaigning; and earnest prayers of confusion and confession from a place of exile.

We read that King Solomon assembles all the leaders of Israel, that they bring the Ark of the covenant, the tent of meeting, and that he makes extravagant ritual as they process into the new temple. What a celebration this is!

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And Solomon gives a speech... **We read in verse 20 & 21:**

Solomon says ²⁰ Now the Lord has upheld the promise that he made; for I have risen in the place of my father David; I sit on the throne of Israel, as the Lord promised, and have built the house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. ²¹

There I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

Homily or political campaign – hard to tell.

It reads as self-serving rhetoric – where Solomon authenticates his kingship to gain support from the nation of Israel, by aligning with the religion of the masses.

Seen that anywhere in our time?

In addition, to support his politics and the desire for the succession of his throne, Solomon defines the Temple as the permanent dwelling place for God. He grasps, he controls, he built the ultimate God-container.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary of Kings – says that in these early verses it seems that Solomon is the primary actor and God is the passive recipient!

A human grasping after God. Taming God. Trying to confine God in a building, in a ritual, in a word. And all in support of his own power.

Reminds me of the words in that old song by music group - The Police (now Sting)

Poets, priests and politicians
Have words to thank for their positions
Words that scream for your submission
And no-one's jamming their transmission

YET in this text, this multi-layered interpreted history, there is also critique.

Because this text is written from Exile.

The Israelites are questioning their history.

In verse 23 they ask the question: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain God, much less this house that [Solomon] built!”

In exile, where they no longer have land, no longer have a King and no longer have a temple in which to worship.

They still know God.

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A God who cannot be constrained. A God who is free.

Sacred Symbols are one way that the invisible God is visible to us – architecture, words, colour, design, art, music, Eucharist, friendship, acts of kindness..

God made visible to us.

And

God is always more, always beyond, always everywhere.

Just as all symbols can invite us to experience God, equally all symbols can lead us away from the One who is beyond words and images.

The Sufi Mystic Rumi says that “words are merely dust on the mirror we call experience”

Language is too small, too narrow, too dusty, too unexpressive and too misleading to give words to the full experience of the Divine.

How can God be named?

- By necessity are not all names too small?
- How can one take the WORD (that uncomprehended, ungrasped logos) and apply our words? (Martin Buber)

YET as social beings, made for community, we are designed to find words (as inadequate as they are) to express all our encounters, even the mysterious ones.

Just as the cloud settled on Solomon’s temple.

A visible expression of the invisible God, resting for in that place.

The mystics invite us to enter what they call the cloud of unknowing.

- Where we let go of what is known; in order to wait for what might be revealed.
- We enter the cloud of unknowing where there is the possibility that God will reveal something of God to us - something perhaps unspeakable. Something of a gift.

Conclusion:

Why are we here? In this temple? Praying (and singing) these words?

When God is always beyond, always everywhere.

We are not here, like Solomon, to constrain God; or to use God for our own power.

We are not here because we ‘own’ God or provide the only access to God.

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We come together to pray. To be transformed. To be unified.

Common prayer is an act of mutual support and generosity to each other.

We constitute (become) the body of Christ in our unity and diversity.

In word and in sacrament – in prayers, in songs, in silence, in the bread and the wine.

And it is the way that Jesus' followers have passed down to us.

It is one way to seek a God who is free and wild.

Some of us are here, even though we have difficulty with the words of our prayers and liturgy...

- *Traditional images like Father or Judge...*
- *Or more contemporary symbols like Mother or Lover...*

Liturgy is highly symbolic. The meanings of these words have accumulated over time and continue to be layered.

The language of our common prayers can be adapted. With great care, spacious reflection and extensive conversations.

And God surprises us, even in the ordinariness and repetition of words and actions.

Today, I invite us to encounter the words of our prayers as a sacred reading (making use of the practice of Lectio Devina):

- To soak in the words with expectation.
- To listen for a word that is just for you.
- to chew and wrestle with that word.
- to pray and rest with that word.
- And then to let the word go.
- To trust that in time a new word will be given.

A word or image or symbol that is not just for our transformation, but for the life of the world.

So, In the words of Saint Anthony of Egypt (4th century monastic father):

Never stop waiting for God,
Never stop trusting in God,
Never stop praying to God.
Amen.