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Proper 16B
Peace, Seattle
August 26, 2012
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43
John 6:56-69

OUT OF THE BOX

I'd like to do two things in today's sermon.
First, pay some attention to the final installment in our summer series of readings from Samuel and 1st Kings; and second, explore a potential connection between what we learn from 1st Kings with the gospel text, the last of five excerpts on Jesus as the Bread of Life.

Our First Testament reading from 1st Kings is a kind of culmination text.
- The kingship which the prophet Samuel warned against—but which the people insisted upon—is now firmly established, and from all accounts its foundation appears to be strong and true.
- The formerly divided kingdom, which became one nation under David's leadership, has prospered under Solomon, attaining a new level of strength and international stature.
- The gift of wisdom Solomon so earnestly desired from the LORD has been granted—so much so that his discernment and breadth of understanding are "as vast as the sand on the seashore."

With the domestic national product reaching new heights and Israel's prominence the envy of all its neighbors, Solomon decides the time is right to make good on the promise to build a house for God's name, a place, a locus and a symbol of God's presence among the people.

If you're interested, you can read a description of what the first Temple looked like and how it was all put together in chapters 5-7 of 1st Kings. But the key verses are found in chapter 6, verses 11-13:

> "Now the word of the LORD came to Solomon, 'Concerning this house that you are building, if you walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.' "

How do these words strike your ears? On the surface it sounds to me like an assurance to Solomon that the promise God made to David will be passed on to Solomon as long as conditions are met.

But I wonder, when we listen to the song beneath the words, it there isn't another message God's trying to communicate. Maybe something like this:

> A HOUSE FOR MY NAME? WELL AND GOOD, BUT YOU NEED TO KNOW THAT IT'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP I'VE MADE WITH MY PEOPLE.
> THIS HOUSE, NO MATTER HOW MAJESTIC OR IMPRESSIVE TO HUMAN EYES, WILL BE JUST AN EMPTY SHELL IF OUR RELATIONSHIP AS GOD AND PEOPLE IS NOT TAKEN TO HEART. DON'T LET THE BUILDING BECOME A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE COMMUNITY I HAVE INVITED MY PEOPLE TO SHARE.

Solomon seems to take the words to heart, and seven years later, the completed Temple is ready for dedication, which brings us to our text today.

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With appropriate humility (which, by the way, was not his strong suite!) Solomon recognizes that no house made with human hands can contain the Creator of the universe. Verse 27:

> 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!

Heaven cannot contain you, O Lord, much less our human inventions or constructions or definitions. But let this place stand as an emblem of your abiding presence, and of your promise to create clean hearts and to forgive.

In some ways this story of the building of the Temple and the dialog around it both here and more especially in the New Testament are archetypal stories about our need as human beings to get a permanent grip on God, like the elusive hold that Jacob sought when he wrestled with Yahweh at the Jabbok River; or like the precise description Moses sought when he asked "WHO SHALL I SAY SENT ME?" and the LORD responded: I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.

We are forever trying to define God, to box God in, contain God, put boundaries around God— as if such a domesticated God is what we need!–and God in turn, it seems, everlastingly refuses to be boxed in, pinned down, domesticated or house-broken.

A few short years after the Temple is dedicated with pomp and circumstance, cracks appear in foundation of the united kingdom. And the unity that took generations to build; the unity achieved by David and prospered by Solomon, is torn asunder as the baton passed to the new generation.

Leaders and people lost sight of the covenant core of fidelity that had brought them life, and found themselves turning to gods of convenience and superstition that gave them a sense—even if it was nonsense—that they could chart their destiny without reference to relationship with the ONE who, from the beginning, had called them into being.

It's only later, in the crucible of exile, when Solomon's once glorious Temple lay in ruins, its stone walls pulled down, its timbers burned, and all its treasures—and leaders—carted off to Babylon… it's only then, bereft of that house of the LORD, that Israel comes to a new realization of what truly counts.

And out of the collective experience of exile, an image begins to emerge of a servant, a divine emissary, who offers himself for the sake of others; a servant through whom life will once again emerge—not by way of wealth or power, not through cleverness or military prowess—but through a vocation of suffering solidarity.

These wholly new ideas—a wholly new conception of how God redeems the world—is only made possible by the destruction of the Temple, the God box.

And five centuries later, it is Jesus who speaks with provocative, new language about what God is up to in the world, and what God is offering not only God's covenant people but all people through himself.

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There were twenty of us from Peace at Holden Village earlier this month.
One memory every guest who ever visits Holden comes away with is the **aroma of freshly baked bread! Right?!**

- Bread available in the dining hall day and night, 24/7.
- Bread baked daily, for meals, for hikes, for snacks.
- Bread with cinnamon-sugar. Bread with cheese, tomato and cucumber. Bread with PB and J.
- Plain bread. Gluten free bread. Bread for the Eucharistic table.

At Holden, bread is always available and it's always good. If you don't care for whatever else is on the menu on any given day, there's always bread. It's been sustaining people there for 50 years now.

Jesus knew the central story of bread in the life of his people.
He knew about the manna that God had provided in the wilderness.
He knew about the bread of affliction his people commemorated in the Passover meal.
And he knew that the "living Father" had sent him to be <u>bread for the world</u>.

Throughout the 6th chapter of John, as we've heard these past five weeks, Jesus progressively sharpens the language he uses around bread, upping the ante on the claim that <u>he</u> is the Bread of Life, God's word made flesh. And today he does it once more.

UNLESS YOU EAT THE FLESH OF THE SON OF MAN AND DRINK HIS BLOOD, he tells those around him, YOU HAVE NO LIFE IN YOU. THOSE WHO EAT MY FLESH AND DRINK MY BLOOD ... ABIDE IN ME, AND I IN THEM.

The original language, as Nicole pointed out last week, is instructive here.
The verb Jesus uses— *"trago"*— means "<u>to gnaw or gobble</u>." It's an animal verb.
The kind of language you'd use to describe what the <u>seals and orcas</u> are doing right now to the migrating Coho salmon; and what the bears, weasels, and bobcats in the wilderness surrounding Holden do to the critters they depend on for life.

For many of his followers this teaching from today's gospel was too much. EAT HIS FLESH? DRINK HIS BLOOD? They couldn't get their minds around it. And the truth is, neither can we.

In fact, much of time the words of Jesus in John are like the fish Kai and I saw following our bait at Hart Lake, which got close enough to the bank for us to catch a glimpse of their size and beauty for just a moment and then they swam away.

We are called to a relationship of total intimacy with Jesus, a relationship of abiding so completely with him that we can't tell where he ends and we begin.

Like a group of Villagers gathered around the bread and toaster at Holden's dining hall, we are invited, even commanded, to ingest that which gives us life...that which will sustain us and bind us to that place, to those gifts, and to each other.

In Jesus, at this table, we meet God face to face and out of the box, calling us back to covenant, back to primary relationship, back to fundamentals—and it doesn't get any more fundamental than this— **Jesus wants me and you literally, to take him into ourselves, to make him part of us and we a part of him, organically, entirely.**

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For when we ingest Jesus, when, in the sacred mystery we call Holy Communion, we receive him at this table—eating and drinking, and taking him into our bodies to become part of our cells, flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood—he truly becomes one with us and we with him.

There can be no arm's length relationship with Jesus here at this table. No safe distance between us. For he is no mere emblem or symbol, he is life itself!

And we, having taken him into ourselves, we in turn become his body in and for the world.

This is what the whole thread of God's story—from Abraham and Sarah to Jacob and Joseph, from Moses and Miriam to David and Solomon and all the rest—this is what the whole line of God's story has been leading toward:

> That vocation wherein we, being called into a relationship with God in Christ so intimate that we literally take him into ourselves bodily as well as spiritually—we become for others what he became for us—bread for the world.

The eternal life that Jesus promises us, you see, doesn't begin in some distant future, at some distant time, in some distant place. It begins right here, right now as we take what he offers us, and in that taking, find ourselves one with him, and one with his mission. Amen.

Let us pray:

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. May this conviction, like yeast in a batch of dough, so permeate our lives individually and the life of our community, that neighbor, friend and stranger will see in our life and mission that which will bring them life as well. In your name we pray. Amen.