

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

John 6:51-58

The text from 1 Kings opens with the death of David, the idealized king of Israel. The text tells us that he was king over Israel for forty years and we know from Scripture that during his kingship he had his share of triumphs and trials. He had his successes and his failures leading his people. David certainly had an interesting reign, he grew up as the youngest son of Jesse, as a shepherd boy, until he was anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, there just happened to be another king at the time. It always makes it really awkward to get a job title while someone else still has that job. While still a boy David killed Goliath, the Philistine, but because he was afraid of King Saul he fled into the wilderness. He ended up fleeing to the hometown of Goliath, into the very heart of enemy lands. While in the wilderness he gathered around himself the lost and discontented as his own people. He gathered around himself a core of the distressed and from that wayward band, Israel's leadership was molded, including her king. Once Saul died, David finally became king over Judah and then ultimately king over a united Israel. He conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of his new kingdom. David built himself a palace to rule from and he brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city. God even promised to establish David's throne forever and ever.

His storied journey from a humble shepherd boy, to giant slayer, to captain over the distressed, to the gracious king of Israel is truly incredible. But his reign was not always legendary, or idyllic, it was often steeped in his own faults and failures. We know he killed off poor Uriah the Hittite, in order to hide his child with Bathsheba, but I guess no one is perfect. Scripture records how his first child conceived in that union died, and his family life only got more dysfunctional as time went on. Yes he certainly had a checkered career as king, but

according to the text, now it is all over. The king has died and Solomon, the son who was never supposed to be king now sits on his father's throne. The text makes it very clear that Solomon sits on a throne that is not his own, that he is sitting in the shadow of his father, with all of his success and his failures. How can he possibly compare to his father? How can he compare to the man who began as the captain of the lost and distressed and became the king of a nation?

Even when the text describes something positive about Solomon, the best he can manage to do is to walk in the statutes of his father David. He is not his own man, trying to walk in the statutes of the Lord, he is so concerned about following his father, that he has placed that at the center of his life. Solomon has been so controlled by who he thinks he should be, he cannot be who God intends him to be. He cannot lead God's people, because he is being led by his own doubts, his own fears. No amount of positive thinking, can fix what is fundamentally broken in Solomon's life. No matter how hard he tried to be the whitewashed version of his father he aspires to be, he will never be able to achieve that goal. Solomon is doomed to fail.

Your pastor has left, he has retired and gone away. He was with you for many years and has left many stories both good, and probably few bad. He led you through times that were good and times that were hard, times that were joyous and times that were sad. He was important in the life of this congregation, the life of this community, and in the lives of all of you. He baptized your children, together you came to the table, and he buried your dead. And now you have me, you have called me to lead this congregation, and it would be easy to feel, especially as someone fresh out of seminary, that I am behind a pulpit that belongs to someone else, to feel the weight of experience from my predecessor. It would be easy to feel confined by the way that he has done things. I could drive to the Church each day. We have all been in this position, whether we are entering a new school year and have teachers placing on us the expectation to be like an older

sibling, whether for better or worse, or if we are becoming someone's spouse or a first time parent and are trying to fill the shoes that are both real and imagined. To see every stumble as a failing to live up to the person that came before us, to see each mistake as proof of our own inadequacy. We all know the feeling of taking over where someone else left off, to have this perfect image of them that is impossible to live up to. To live with our own disappointment in ourselves, which only we bring into existence.

The text continues on to describe how Solomon's vision of the Lord in a dream. God asks Solomon what He should give to Solomon, and Solomon responds "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in".

You can hear it in Solomon's voice just how worthless he feels sitting on David's throne. He paints this picture of David as this perfect man, this righteous, faithful, and upright man, which we know is not true, while Solomon sees himself being the little child so unable to care for himself, let alone this entire people. He thinks so little of himself and his abilities, Solomon is overwhelmed with the doubts in his own head. By comparing himself to a little child, he is revealing just how worthless he believes himself to be. It is heartbreaking to hear Solomon describe his inner torments, to hear how he has defined his own life by centering it on his father, to have his anxieties, our anxieties laid bare before the Lord.

Solomon in this intimate and revealing conversation shows that he elevates his father onto a pedestal that is truly unreachable, and thinks so little of himself and his abilities, that he is

crippled by self doubt. He goes on to say, “And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted... for who can govern this your great people?”. Solomon feels way over his head, not only does he fail when compared to his father, but he is asking God who can govern this great and chosen people, when the answer is clearly not him. The Solomon we find in these passages is so unsure of himself, so much in the shadow his father left, both real and imagined, so much in awe of the people he is serving, that he is paralyzed. He is crippled forever by this image he has of his father, of what it means to be a king, and by his people, that is so unable to move forward with the task he has been given.

Solomon asks God for a discerning mind, which can distinguish between good and evil. Another translation of what Solomon is asking for is “a heart that listens”. He is asking God for a heart that listens so he can hear the needs of his people and judge how best to care for them. It is only through the encounter of God’s comforting grace, his life giving mercy that Solomon is able to find the center from which he can live his life, the center from which he can govern his people, the center from which the Church rests. This is the center, we the lost and discontented can find who we are meant to be, stripped of our anxieties, and doubts, and the shadows which hang over us are illuminated by God’s radiating light.

In my time with you, I pray that God gives me a heart that listens so that despite my inexperience, despite any fears or doubts, I can listen to what you need, what this community needs, and be guided in what is good. I pray that as a community called together by God, that we can center our lives on the only foundation that will hold. I know that nothing within myself can give me a heart which listens, nothing within myself can calm any doubts I might have. No, looking within ourselves only pushes us further into our fears, makes us deaf to all other voices

but those which plague us, the only thing which can calm our doubts and fears God. God reached down to Solomon, past all of his weakness, past his feelings of worthlessness, past the chasm that only God could bridge. God reached down to Solomon and poured out His grace, taking away what was broken and hurt, removing his previous definition of self, his feelings of worthless, and gave Solomon grace strong enough to build his life upon, not only for himself but the whole congregation of Israel.

The only thing which can take us out of the shadow of another is the Holy Other, it frees us to be the people God intends us to be. It is only Christ which gives an answer that will satisfy, to our darkest question, put forth first by the Heidelberg Catechism, “what is your only comfort, in life and in death”? Only that we belong body and soul to Him, our Savior, who continually assures each one of us personally of eternal life. This is the only thing which can calm our all our deepest anxieties and center our lives.

In the reading from John, Jesus proclaims, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”. This passage has traditionally been interpreted as defining the Eucharist, but it is so much more. This is the incarnation declared, God who is not only the Creator, separated from His Creation, but has come down into the mess, into the despair and disappointment of human life.

This is the salvation that Christ brings to us in His flesh, this flesh is not a mask that separates us from God, it is the humanity which God made proper to Himself, it is the flesh which makes Christ our Brother. The living bread that came down from Heaven is Christ, the one person who is both God and man, without confusion or separation. The salvation that Christ is proclaiming is the same salvation we find within the Eucharist. In celebrating the Eucharist,

we celebrate the God deep in the flesh, we joyously proclaim that Christ is ever present for us. The Gospel message that Jesus declares, is that in the flesh, in the bread, the love, power, mercy, and life giving grace of God is always with us, always for us. Through Christ we have attained access to the life giving flesh, the grace giving bread, which we gather around, which calms all of our answers all of our doubts. It is this life giving flesh, which we encounter again and again at Christ's table, communing in our life in Christ.

The Sacramental meaning behind Jesus' words, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you", have stood as points of division between the churches born in the reformation. But regardless of sacramental differences, for all, Christ's words declare the present-tense Gospel message for the world to hear. That Christ not only died as a historic reality, but Christ remains the one who is for us, and for our salvation, today and every day. The Christ who pours Himself out into human flesh on the cross, is the end to all abstraction, all separation between us and our Creator. This Christ concretely present, concretely and fundamentally for us, declares that He will raise us up on the last day. Our Healer declares that on the last day we will have life no longer stepped in sin, or defined by our hurt and scars, but will finally have life that is glorified in the light of Christ our Redeemer.

Having Christ present for me and for you, personally, in our fellowship together, is not only the only comfort that we find, it is our greatest joy. It is the one thing that we can center or worship on, it is the one thing we can center our lives around, that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, to die for our salvation, and that remains with us and for us forever. Your pastor has left, he has retired and gone away. He was with you for many years and has left many stories both good, and probably few bad. He led you through times that were good and times that were hard, times that were joyous and times that were sad. He was important in the life of this congregation, the life of

this community, and in the lives of all of you. He baptized your children, together you came to the table, and he buried your dead. And now you have me. But through all of the changes, through all of the difference, through all of the mistakes I will probably make, I will declare to you the same message again and again that no longer are we defined by what is broken and scarred but by the life we have in Christ, the life that we come to together as one body, around the living bread.