I Kings 8:1, 6-11, 22-30, 41-43
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Ellen Crawford True

Poles

After he is anointed as God's chosen successor to Saul in last week's text, the boy David grows up to be king, the king most adored throughout the Hebrew tradition, the king who becomes a crucial link in Jesus' earthly lineage. David establishes Jerusalem as the capital and dances the Ark of the Covenant into the city. He longs to build a house for God to honor the One who has loved him and led him, confronted him and forgiven him. And yet God tells David that God will instead build a house for and from David, a dynasty that will sit on the throne for ages to come. It will be David's son who will build a house for God, and Solomon is that son. [Read I Kings 8:1, 6-11, 22-30, 41-43]

The scene is staggering. People as far as the eye can see. Their most sacred possessions finally being brought home, meaning this people whose grandparents and great-grandparents wandered for decades are finally truly home themselves. As my friend Chris Tuttle writes:

> It hearkens back for some to the tens of thousands present when King David, some 40 years prior, had brought the Ark of the Covenant back from the caves to the center of the city. ALL of the people are assembled, the text says, and the elders came, the priests carrying the Ark. They followed the Ark from the tent of meeting, then all of the holy vessels and belongings, the leaders and all of the people, offering grand sacrifices to God. It culminates in this scene where heaven and earth come together, when the Ark – both a box with the tablets of the law from Moses AND a symbol of God's *very real presence with the people*, come into the temple, into the inner sanctuary, underneath the wings of the cherubim, God's own holy attendants, there. The priests put together this inner sanctum, poles affixed, curtains set, as the Ark is put into

place THE VERY PRESENCE OF GOD in a cloud—echoes of the pillar of cloud and fire that led the people through the wilderness from Egypt—a holy fog fills the House of the Lord.[1]

When we then meet Solomon in front of the altar, the great, grand building project is finished. The punch list has been completed, and all the furnishings have been put where they were intended to go. The holy things are home, as are the holy beloved long-wandering people.

Except they're not. Scholars tell us that these stories are not written down until much later when the people are in Exile and this exquisite Temple lies in ruins. Which makes me wonder about those poles that the writer insists "are still there to this day." Um. No. They're not, and anyone with sense would tilt their head in confusion at that particular point. So why on earth would a careful writer include that detail? The poles were not particularly holy in and of themselves; they served a practical purpose. Human beings could not touch the Ark, the sacred vessel that held the tablets with the Ten Commandments. The poles gave those doing the heavy lifting something to grab hold of whenever the Ark was moved. And for some reason, the text tells us that the poles of all things could be seen peeking out from the inner sanctum and emphasizes that they—out of everything else—are still there generations later.

We have spent the past month considering what it means to build a house for God as we seek God's guidance in how and what we should give to the work of God in and through this place in the coming year. We have heard the story of God's faithfulness in the wilderness, raining down manna for every wandering one, regardless of age or ability, giving us a firm foundation on which to stand. We have reflected on God's calling children like Samuel and young people like David to listen and follow and lead the people with humility and courage, giving us sturdy walls of truth, doors of mercy, and

[1] From his paper for The Well, 2017

windows that shine with God's persistent and unfailing grace. And we have been reminded again and again that if we aim to build something that honors God, we can only build on what has been built for and through us by God first. God has laid the foundation of faithfulness. God has shaped the walls of justice and opened the doors flung wide with mercy. God has crafted windows of light and grace. Our work is simply a response to God's work.

And so today, when we read that the long-awaited house for God is finished, we may begin to wonder how finished it can truly be when we learn that that house, that grand and glorious Temple will fall in a matter of years. If God's house, God's Temple can be destroyed, what does it mean for those of us who long to find God all these years later? If God's house can crumble, how can we have any hope of standing strong?

The purpose of the Temple was never to cage God in. The purpose of the Temple was to provide a place for the people to gather and worship and be reminded of the One who fed them manna, the One who guided them through the desert day after day and night after night, the One who remained with them when leaders let them down and kings lost their way. And as this story was shared around campfires far from home in Exile, this memory of the Temple offered not simply nostalgia about the glory days but deep and persistent hope for the days ahead. One could wonder if the poles being visible was a design flaw in the meticulously planned space, but those poles tell me something more. The poles are not part of the Temple's structure. They predate the structure in fact, and they remind me that no human structure is permanent, and that the God whose glory fills that space is also the God who is on the move with and for God's beloved ones. Those poles remind me that God met us not only in Pharaoh's court but also in the wilderness. Those poles remind me that God came alongside us and chose to make a covenant with us when we had no home to call our own. Those poles remind me that

the presence of God was never contained and never can be contained in any one vessel or captive to any one people. The God of Israel is the Lord of all, and that God is with the exile, the foreigner, the child, and the king, and any structure, any people that carries God's name is intended to make that abundantly clear, leaving space so the poles are still visible for anyone and everyone to see. For any house for God—if it is built with genuine faith—points not to itself—but to God alone, above and beyond anything or anyone else.

Toward the end of worship this morning, we will dedicate our pledges to God's work in and through this place in the coming year. The money we give will be used to pay light bills and fix furnaces, to buy sheet music and copier paper. The gifts we offer will pay our staff and be used to purchase Vacation Bible School supplies. Our pledges will support our siblings in Congo and Haiti and help Opportunity House give our unhoused neighbors a warm safe place to shelter during the day and empower Esther's Heart to provide them a hot meal, a friendly welcome, and a coat to help hold winter winds at bay. Not one of these line items contains God in any final or finite way. They are poles really, small but tangible reminders that God is with us when we are at home and when we are in exile and everywhere in between. By the grace of God, our gifts will be part of a larger and longer witness pointing others to the poles our ancestors looked to in the past, the poles we ourselves look for and grab hold of when the world seems shaky and the ground quakes beneath our feet. By the grace of God, our gifts will witness not to our faithfulness or accomplishments but to God and to God's abundant faithfulness in the past and to the promise of that faithfulness in the days ahead for us and for all. And by the grace of God, our gifts will serve to carve out a place and a people where the stories of God's goodness, love, mercy, and justice are shared and remembered and celebrated, and to shape a place and a people where friends, neighbors, and strangers will return time and again to be inspired,

nourished, and encouraged for courageous and faithful lives beyond these walls. For the great good news is this: when the walls stand tall and when they crumble, when we walk through doors flung wide with mercy and when we find ourselves fumbling for a lost key, when the windows shine bright with grace and hope and when the panes seem clouded over because of fear or uncertainty, the poles remain, reminding us and everyone else that God is still there, still here, still with us to this day and in every day to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.