

14th Sunday after Pentecost B
Church of the Advent
August 26, 2018

Second Thoughts

How often do you find yourself saying or thinking, “it seemed like a good idea at the time?” I do love sarcasm at some visceral level, and often wonder if that is a product of my age, the communication style of my family of origin, or just one of my own special sins deserving of self-justification because I lay it upon myself as much as I do others. In any case, when something does not go according to plan, when good intentions go wrong, or when an initial enthusiastic commitment to something new seems to fall apart when the devil in the details rears his ugly head and spouts lots of “second thoughts,” “it seemed like a good idea at the time” is meant to be a light-hearted rejoinder to the situation that lands somewhere between “at least they meant well” and “too bad they didn’t see *that* one coming.”

For example, there was the time Mark and I went exploring and drove into the back side of Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge—without a paper map, without a cell phone signal and without a clue that miles of unmarked unpaved roads between canals could lead to full-on barricades that created dead ends requiring going back through many more miles of same for hours before finding the way out to a main road. Seemed like a good idea at the time—you get the idea. My mother’s version was always “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” which I think is *way* more judgy, though I have found it to apply at times even when the roads were *unpaved*.

Our scripture readings from this morning offer a couple of stories—one from the Book of Kings and one from the gospel John—that are reminders that things do not always go according to plan, not even for the wisest King Solomon, not even for Jesus and his closest disciples.

The first is from the Book of Kings, where Solomon—in all his glory—prays aloud to God hoping that God’s promises to his father David would be passed on to him, the beloved offspring who built God a magnificent house—the first Temple in Jerusalem. Remember last week we heard Solomon pray to God in humility, asking for wisdom—not riches. In answer, God gave him both, bringing Solomon treaties with many foreign rulers, allowing him to secure the foreign financial backing and raw materials he needed to complete the Temple in seven years. In today’s reading Solomon seems to be looking for a pat on the head and reassurance that he has done the right thing in God’s eyes and will be rewarded for it. And if he had accumulated immense wealth and power in the process, well that was all to the good, for did not God promise him riches, too? For



while building the Temple, Solomon also built and furnished a luxurious palace complex for himself, using forced slave labor, all while accumulating 700 wives and 300 concubines—of every possible foreign origin and pagan belief—many of whom demanded temples to their own foreign gods. Solomon makes the case in his

prayer for foreigners whom he imagined would be so impressed with his Temple that they would come to know and obey the Lord God “ so that all the peoples of the earth shall know your name and fear you.”

Sadly for Solomon, things did not turn out the way he hoped. He did not continue walking in God’s ways. (*Seriously? He needed 1000 women?*)

Though Solomon had achieved much, earning the respect of foreign rulers—including the Queen of Sheba—the rest of Solomon’s reign of 40 years was filled with competition and strife. The whole Temple thing seemed like a good idea at the time, and who is to say whether the good intentions with which it was conceived did please God? But poor wise Solomon had let it all go to his head and gotten a bit carried away. Before he died, all but one of the tribes of Israel were scattered by conquering armies. Eventually the Temple itself was destroyed at the time the Israelites were taken into exile by the Babylonians. For Solomon, the road to hell must have begun on his doorstep, every

time he stepped into his own house, for no dwelling could be magnificent enough to accommodate 1000 women.

Our story from John's gospel takes us once again to Capernaum, where Jesus continues his teaching about the bread of heaven. He persists in upsetting those who have been following him around—attracted by the rule breaker with the radical message that the first would be last and the last first, captivated by the healer—the worker of miracles. But now Jesus seems to have gone off the deep end—insisting on talking about eating human flesh and drinking human blood, something that was not even allowed with animals, whose blood was drained and sacrificed to God as representing the very soul of each created being. Beyond just challenging taboo, Jesus was talking crazy. His words had become *hard teachings*—hard to comprehend, hard to justify, hard to accept. They could not believe, and many of them turned back and walked away. Show over, too good to be true, seemed like a good idea at the time.

What do these two stories, from different times and about different things, have to teach us today, when we are so far removed from the times and places they came from? I think they are both about *faith*. In the first, the story is about faith in God and God's promises. We believe in God the Father Almighty, and we pray to him—together and alone—in praise, in thanksgiving, and in petition for anything we need and everything we want. We offer our faith as a Temple to God, and yet sometimes get a bit carried away—like Solomon—losing our focus on the main thing, and diverting our energies towards our *own* versions of palatial homes for hundreds of wives. The excesses of the super-wealthy have been on parade in our news this past week and though we might rightly find them absurd, they are merely exaggerated symbols of what we are all capable of—desiring that which can potentially obstruct the full measure of our faith. We expect God to be there for us always, and God is faithful; yet we forget that God would love for us to be there for God always—even when it is inconvenient, and even when it interferes with a visit from the Queen of Sheba.

The gospel story from John is also about faith—a more radical, bare-boned kind of faith in Jesus Christ whose teachings *are* hard and really do *not* make any more sense

in our world than they did in his. We want to believe that the last shall be first when we happen to be among the *last*, but not the other way around. We crave belief in healing and forgiveness and kindness and love, and yet we fear the cost of bearing those things into a world that does not seem to honor them much. We are hungry for the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, because by faith we know it is the only true sustenance that gets us through our days, and yet admit that when we speak of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, that others might find it offensive, and so we keep the Good News to ourselves.

So where does this leave us—the flawed faithful people of God? It leaves us hopeful—in the faithfulness and mercy of God, in our salvation bought by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ manifest in his resurrection, and in the blessed assurance that God does not live in Temples made of brick and gold, but within each and every one of us. Our hope is renewed and our faith is strengthened when we come together, read the Word, see our failings, accept forgiveness, and break and share the bread and drink the cup of salvation. And regardless of how many times our latest distraction “seemed like a good idea at the time,” no matter how many times we have had second thoughts, we find our God waiting for us with open arms, always. For if not to the Lord, to whom could we go? Amen.