

Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?

1 Kings 8:1-13, 27

John 6:56-68

I'd like to teach you a brief song this morning. I'd like us to learn it together so that we may be joined in a prayer of the heart as we turn to the living Word for us today. It's only one line, and it goes like this:

Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the words of eternal life.

Sing it with me.

Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the words of eternal life.

Now, let's try singing it as a prayer. We'll sing it several times over, and as we do so, I invite you to let the words sink into your spirit. Let this question become your question. Let this answer become your prayer. Let's pray...

Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the words of eternal life.

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Last week, I was away on study leave. I began what will be an 18-month program at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. The program is called Going Deeper: Spiritual Leadership for Clergy. I spent a week with 13 other clergy from various denominations learning about how to lead congregations, not from a managerial or administrative mindset, but from a contemplative center. If that sounds a bit foreign to you, it might help to remember that the word *contemplation* comes from the Latin *con-templare*. *Con - Temple*. And if you think about a temple as being a place which houses the divine, then it's a bit easier to see that a contemplative approach is simply one which sees the presence of Divine dwelling in all things... the contemplative approach is one that waits upon the Divine, listens for the leading—not of the pastor—but of the Holy Spirit.

One of the most important ideas reinforced for me in this past week is the understanding that there is a gaping difference between the way God sees ... and knows ... and is... and the way we do. When we encounter the Divine in all God's glory, we are often taken aback. Sometimes we are perplexed, dumbfounded, at worst irritated – even offended. At best, we are awe-struck, humbled, knocked to our knees, filled with wonder at the holy. It struck me, as I studied the lectionary texts for today that what these readings both point to is this jarring collision of the divine and the mundane—the holy and the human—and they both invite us to look again—not from a human point of view, but from a holy one.

Beth just read to us the story of the dedication of the great temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon poured everything into building that temple. You can read about its construction in chapters 5 through 7 of 1 Kings... and the opulence will astound you. The walls are made of costly stones, overlaid with precious cedar transported from Lebanon. Seventy-five thousand slaves labored to build it. Everything is gilded with bronze and silver and gold. It all glitters and sparkles and reflects Solomon's wealth and power. On the day of its dedication, Solomon brings the precious evidence of God's relationship with Israel—the Ark of the Covenant—into the temple. For eons, the Ark had been housed in a tent, originally sewn together out in the wilderness of Sinai. This tent was called the Tabernacle, and it was understood that God took up his seat upon the Ark each time the Israelites set up camp. And now... now the Ark is being carried into the permanent Temple. The house where God shall dwell.

With great ceremony, every step of the way, Solomon sacrifices thousands of sheep and oxen to God. It's striking how ostentatious and over-the-top the whole scene is – Solomon standing before all the people, standing on the steps of this huge edifice, swollen with pride at all he's built. And when the Shekinah or glory of God evidently fills the space, Solomon cries out "The Lord has said he would dwell in thick darkness, but I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever!"

His human eyes are filled with what he's achieved... but somehow eventually he realizes the truth: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Solomon has been given vision—not through the eyes of his human power and authority and achievement, but through the eyes of the Spirit—to see the truth that God cannot and will not be constrained or confined by the boxes we build to put God in, no matter how extravagant they are. God indeed dwells among us but no house can contain him... Remember? He is not here... for he is risen...

A thousand years later, Jesus comes into the world, described by John's Gospel as the Word made flesh... And the Word—the Word that spoke creation into being—became incarnate—took on a body, became enfleshed, and dwelt among us. John 1:14. The verb that John uses for the word "to dwell" means, literally "to tabernacle." The Word *tabernacled* among us. The Word which *IS* God came into the world, revealing God's presence to us in the same way that God's glory filled the tabernacle and filled the Temple. The Word became flesh and dwelt—tabernacled—set up tent—camped—among us.

Which brings me to the words of Jesus. Let's listen carefully together to the Word of God as it comes to us from the Gospel of John 6:56 - 68:

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood live in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever. ...*

*When many of his disciples heard it, they said: This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?*

*But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, Does this offend you?*

*Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*

*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.*

*For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.*

*Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*

*So Jesus asked the twelve, Do you also wish to go away?*

*Simon Peter answered him,*

*Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the words of eternal life.....*

Eat my flesh. Drink my blood.

*Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the words of eternal life.....*

These words come at the end of a long teaching by Jesus about bread. Masses of people swarm after him once he's multiplied the bread and fish, and so he launches into a long discourse that explains what true food and drink is... and as he talks, his words grow increasingly provocative. Agonizing. Antagonizing. Hard to hear.

He progressively alienates the religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees, and we see them slip away to plot his arrest. He goes on to speak hard words that separate out the multitudes who are simply looking for an easy handout, and they turn to seek dinner elsewhere. And now, to the diminished group gathered round him, he speaks words to which even his disciples find it impossible to listen.

*My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood live in me, and I live in them.*

Let me ask you, what's your reaction? Are you groping for an explanation? A way to understand it? Or has it already been equated for you into communion—the neat little squares of bread and the tiny cups of grape juice, easily swallowed? Or can you hear deeply enough to recognize in there the dangerous invitation to share in Jesus' journey to the cross, and the painful death of self that will follow? Or can you meet Jesus again for the first time and be appalled by the cannibalistic strangeness – scandalized by the graphic shock of imagery – can you hear with ears new enough to be startled, dumbfounded, perplexed, maybe a trifle irritated – dare I say offended? If so, you are among the ones Jesus called his disciples...

I'm sorry. We keep coming to church hoping for a word of comfort to soothe us and lift our spirits, but once again, we encounter, not gentle Jesus meek and mild—where DID that image ever come from, anyway?—but Jesus, provocative, challenging, discomforting, leaving us sitting here unsure of what to say or think or how in the world to respond ..... Eat my flesh, drink my blood! No! Not easy to swallow ... harder still to digest.

Well, it appears we're in good company. Even the disciples shake their heads until only a mere twelve remain, and one of *them* is Judas...

Recently, I've been thinking about the church—not as a body of faithful believers who hold some monolithic carved-in-stone doctrine—but as a diverse crowd of folks trying to follow Jesus. We each come with our own understandings, our own abilities to hear, our own stumbling blocks and blind spots. And we each travel on diverse paths to meet him.

Ancient eastern and Christian thought identified these pathways.<sup>1</sup> Some come along the Way of the Good – the way followed by those who have hearts to serve, who find faith meaningful through action, through doing the righteous thing, seeking justice. Some come by what has been called the Way of the True. This Way seeks to know the truth for the truth will set you free. What does it mean? How can I understand it? How can I know God? Some come by what has been called the Way of the Beautiful – for those who are inspired by sensory and emotional stimuli of art, poetry, song and silence. And last, but not least, are those who come by the Way of Struggle. This is the way followed by those who doubt, who come, kicking and screaming and questioning and resisting. This way is the way of the cynic and the skeptic, those who resist any easy answers or false sense of security. They come in spite of themselves—caught in the dragnet of God who lovingly draws us all. The Way of the Good, the Way of the True, the Way of the Beautiful, the Way of the Struggle. As we look out at the group gathered round Jesus, we see them all – the servants, the students, the artists, the doubters. The disciples. They are us.

You may have come along a single path—Good or True, Beautiful or Struggling. Or you may have tried them all. Although one may have initially drawn you in, you may find these paths converging. Indeed, as we grow and mature in faith, these ways grow together into One Way. The Way. The Truth. The Life.

I think we'll all eventually discover that any of these paths can easily become our ways to try to control God – to build a big enough box to somehow comprehend, grasp, control, contain ... possess... God. Which is probably the perfect strategy to prevent God from grasping, holding, taking possession... of us.

Jesus says... if you eat my flesh, and drink my blood – if you partake in me – if you taste and see that the Lord is indeed good... then I will dwell in you... I will tabernacle in you... I will take up residence in you... I will fill you... I will satisfy you... I will live through you... I will shine forth to the world through you.

I cannot comprehend it by the Way of the True. I cannot paint it or sing it or even speak of it by the Way of the Beautiful. I cannot serve it or make it happen or earn it by the Way of the Good. And my struggling and questions and doubts in the Way of the Struggle are futile against the fathomless mystery of the Way. The Truth. and the Life. Ultimately... Like Solomon, we stand in awe and holy wonder before the mystery of God. You cannot solve the mystery, you can only live the mystery. And so we open the doors of the temple, we lift the flap of the tent and we say: live in here. Ultimately ... Like Peter, by the grace of God we look to Jesus and say...*Lord, to whom shall we go? Yours are the Words of eternal life.*

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<sup>1</sup> These ponderings are drawn from a handout entitled "Contemplative Spirituality" written by staff at the Shalem Institute in March 2004.