

Wisdom for the Next Fifty Years
1 Kings 8 and Ephesians 6:10-20

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Preached August 26, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica
on the Occasion of Celebrating the 50th Anniversary
of the Independence of Trinidad and Tobago

I'm imagining that on August 31, 1962, the feeling in Trinidad and Tobago was something like that of Jerusalem on the day of the dedication of the Temple, the Lord's house. A proud procession, high hopes, elevated expectations, impassioned speeches, songs sung with national pride and fervor, and prayers for the future of the nation. I can imagine that many people viewed Dr. Eric Eustace Williams, their soon-to-be first Prime Minister, as a figure not unlike King Solomon: educated, wise, and perfectly prepared for that moment, and perhaps even divinely chosen. I would imagine that more than one person who witnessed the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the new flag of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago felt certain that God's own hand was behind the birth of this new nation, that they had been granted freedom not by political power but by divine will. Yes, there are many parallels between the inauguration of the Temple and the birth of the nation, but perhaps none more important than their inherent fragility, and the need to be mindful to care for the gift, if it is to continue to be the blessing it was intended to be.

All nations are fragile. All empires hang in the balance. All dreams exist on that razor's edge of sleeping and waking. God endures but institutions do not, no

matter how carefully constructed, no matter how principled the ideology. Our institutions are fragile precisely because even though God may have ordained them, we administer them, and we are flawed people, imperfect in countless, but important ways. To place our faith in institutions, no matter how noble or desperately needed, is to place our trust in ourselves, and that is a dangerous thing, because as at least I have experienced in my own life, the only person you can really count on is your mother, God bless her soul. For all of our best intentions, our mothers can't clean up for us forever, and we will ultimately fail to keep clean our spiritual or political or economic houses, and they will fall into disrepair or be overrun by the enemy, or worse, be used to betray the very principles and passions on which they were founded.

Pardon me if I sound cynical for the moment; the Gospel is coming. It's just that we know what happened to Solomon's temple, and the nation for which he was charged with caring. In just the next generation, it splintered into two nations, and it went downhill from there until finally both of those nations found themselves exiled in the most brutal fashion to the lands of their conquerors, with women, children, and the elderly forced to march thousands of miles through the desert, resettled into cities full of people hostile towards them and their ways of life. So much for the Temple in Jerusalem. Fat lot of good it did them to have that! But the clues to why all of that happened are found right here in this eighth chapter

of the book of First Kings, ironically enough, even in the very prayer King Solomon offers.

Tonight's texts come from what we call the Revised Common Lectionary, a collection of Biblical passages formed into a three year cycle to make sure preachers don't only preach on the parts of the Bible they like. So it is not that I chose this passage from First Kings because it bears some resemblance to an event in the life of the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The Lectionary is funny that way, that the weekly correspondence between text and context sometimes seems just too close to the mark, as if it were divinely appointed rather than humanly constructed. The Lectionary is funny too in the way it sometimes cherry-picks verses to stick to the basics of a longer story, often leaving out repetitive or diversionary verses in favor of keeping us reading to get the main point, funny because sometimes what gets passed over is just what we need to hear. Interestingly, what is left out of the Lectionary reading tonight is perhaps the more important part of what Solomon said that day, and it is here we find perhaps some wisdom for the next fifty years of Trinidad and Tobago's independence, or for that matter, any nation's future, or this church's life and witness, or any of our marriages and families and relationships. You see, the events we would celebrate, the people we would cherish, the promises we would keep, the justice we would do, all depend on what we *don't* hear Solomon say in the verses between verses 30 and 52. Let me explain what I mean.

Beginning in verse 31 is a list of seven specific petitions Solomon makes of God, six of which conform to a sort of pattern, a telling pattern. For example, the second, and the shortest, says, “When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray, and plead with you in this house, then hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors.” This one deals with the nation’s enemies, but Solomon also addresses drought and famine and sickness and even immigrants. And in all but the petition for the sake of the immigrants in their midst, there can be seen a pattern which goes something like this: When, not if, but when we sin, something bad will happen. And when that something bad happens, we will probably see the error of our ways and we will seek you out again, and we will confess and repent, and when we do, *when we do*, “then hear in heaven your dwelling place,” and forgive us and respond to our need. Solomon is saying up front, even as the very temple is being dedicated, while all the celebrations are taking place, when all anyone wants to do is party, that yes this is your house, no, you can’t be contained in it, and wherever you are, please don’t give up on us when we fail. He is asking, up front, for the forgiveness he knows will be needed if the institutions they cherish are to remain viable into the future.

There is some debate among scholars as to whether these words demonstrate Solomon’s actual wisdom, or their author’s not-so-subtle critique of Solomon’s

wisdom, since a few chapters later on, we learn that it is Solomon's sin which leads to the downfall of the nation. The books of First and Second Kings were written, after all, not to praise the nations' kings but to bury them, and Solomon is probably not the exception to that rule. Be that as it may, there is wisdom in these words for those with the ears to hear, a wisdom which calls the leaders and participants of any institution to a kind of continuous self-examination to make sure they are taking care of business, and by that I mean the Lord's business, not their own. Solomon's wisdom, or that of those who would question it, recognizes that a nation, or a church, or a family, cannot endure if it does not, in the words of the soon-to-be coming prophet Micah, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with its God. The Biblical prophets who will bring God's message of wrath and judgment to the kings who will follow Solomon do so with a perspective that suggests that God metes out a direct punishment in response to sin; the nation sins, and God sends the enemy to overthrow it. The king sins, and God causes the rain to stop falling. These days, we might find that a little hard or troubling to swallow. These days, it makes more sense to us to see that a society or a church or a family that doesn't abide by God's wisdom is a society or a church or a family that will find itself less and less healthy, weaker and weaker, more open to revolution or conflict or divorce. A society or a church or a family that does not care first and foremost for "the least of these," or the "widow and the orphan and the stranger," one that does not "suffer the little children" to come to Jesus is one which fails the

test the late Minnesota senator Paul Wellstone applied to US politics; how do the policies you seek to enact affect the poorest, the weakest, the most marginalized among you? If the answer you offer doesn't take into account those who can't ask the question for themselves in the first place, you'll probably find yourself on the wrong side of God, and wondering why it's all falling apart.

God has given us things we cherish, our nations, our churches, our families. But as I mentioned earlier, these are fragile things, easily crushed by clumsy hands and clumsier hearts. What I would like to think we can learn from passages such as tonight's from First Kings and Ephesians is that if we would honor what we believe God has given us, we will do everything in our power to take care of it, and that is, to avoid the sin which will lead to its downfall. If the nation of Trinidad and Tobago wants to live into the fullness of its independence, it will always keep an eye on its humility, and its dependence of God and all members of the nation. Otherwise, it will run the risk of replicating the system it successfully replaced fifty years ago. Ephesians speaks to this. It is not military forces that threaten a nation; it is that nation's own greed, sin, hubris, and injustice that leave it weak and open to attack, to forces from without and within. Without maintaining the strong foundations on which it was built, those foundations will crumble and the house come tumbling down. On Independence Day fifty years ago, Prime Minister Eric Williams offered the following assessment of democracy, "Democracy, finally, rests on a higher power than Parliament. It rests on an informed and cultivated and

alert public opinion. The Members of Parliament are only representatives of the citizens. They cannot represent apathy and indifference. They can play the part allotted to them only if they represent intelligence and public spiritness.” Well said, Mr. Prime Minister. Yes, it will not be tanks and jet fighters that bring down Trinidad and Tobago, or any other nation. It will be apathy and indifference. It will be because a nation’s leaders chose to believe more in their own power than God’s power, more in the external threat than the threat within their own hearts. It will be because they have forgotten, or chosen to ignore, the truth that “our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In this famous passage from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul goes on to describe what preparation is needed to persevere, to survive, in living out the grace his church has received. What they need is the “whole armor of God,” and what is that? Well, it’s truth and righteousness, peace and faith, salvation and the very Word of God, basically all the same things Solomon prayed for at the dedication of the Temple so long ago.

I said the Gospel was coming, and here it is, that in Jesus Christ, we will be able to stand firm, to withstand the temptations which would derail or destroy us, to persevere in doing what is true and righteous and just not just because God has told us to, but because the health of what we cherish depends on it, not just because it is our job or our formal responsibility, but because so much more depends on it. We will carry on because we have learned, or at least are trying to learn, to love as

Jesus loved us. We will continue on in faith because God can be trusted to do what we cannot, to “hear in heaven your dwelling place,” and forgive if we would but recognize the error of our ways. In profound ways, post-independence Trinidad and Tobago has been marked by the legacy of its first Prime Minister Eric Williams. But as the nation has learned in the years since his death, he is neither the beginning nor the end of the story, just the subject of an important chapter in that story. The beginning and the end of the story of all of our institutions is, and always must be, God, who calls us to write humility and hope into our, personal chapter of that story. May the nation of Trinidad and Tobago enjoy its next fifty years of self-rule. May the Church of Jesus Christ continue to declare boldly the Gospel. And may each of us cherish the blessings we have received and give thanks for God’s steadfast love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.