



“Context is Everything”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 23, 2009***

I Kings 8:1–43 (NRSV)

“Context is everything,”¹ writes K. Kris Hirst, in her article about archeology, posted on www.about.com. “[Context is] an important concept in archaeology, and one that isn't given a lot of public attention until things go awry...”²

Continuing on, Dr. Hirst writes:

Context, to an archaeologist, means the place where an artifact is found. Not just the place, but the soil, the site type, the layer the artifact came from, what else was in that layer. The importance of where an artifact is found is profound. A site, properly excavated, tells you about the people who lived there, what they ate, what they believed, how they organized their society.

The whole of our human past, particularly prehistoric, but historic period too, is tied up in the archaeological remnants, and it is only by considering the entire package of an archaeological site that we can even begin to understand what our ancestors were about. Take an artifact out of its context and you reduce that artifact to no more than pretty. The information about its maker is gone.³

This is why archeologists get so bent out of shape by looters, and why they are aggravated by antique dealers who say things like, “The chest was found somewhere outside of Jerusalem.”

Context is everything in biblical literature, too. Biblical context, much like archeological context, has to do with the geographic location, the time period, the community in which the piece of writing develops, the social location of the author, the audience for which it is intended, and the people and circumstances which influenced the oral storytellers and then the subsequent authors who documented and later transcribed the written words, verses, chapters, and books, which we now collectively refer to as “the Bible.”

¹ <http://archaeology.about.com/cs/ethics/a/context.htm>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

This is why enlightened students and scholars of the Bible are so bent out of shape when proof-texters lift a verse or paragraph out of an ancient collection of writings such as these, and claim that a) they understand perfectly the intent of the original author, and b) that this handful of verses means exactly what they say it means, in some very specific situation in our time, when they don't speak or read any of the biblical languages, have little knowledge or awareness that there is a cultural context out which the text arose, and they may never have lived outside their own home culture—and may never want to.

II

In just a moment, I'm going to provide you with an example of what I mean about the importance of context when it comes to biblical literature, and I'm going to offer that example with today's Old Testament text, from I Kings 8, precisely because there is nothing particularly controversial about this text or its context.

Why bother with this exercise?

Well, because context is an essential element of understanding, interpreting, and relating a biblical passage to modern life, but most preachers don't make this point apart from sermons and writings on controversial topics.

If you've been following the ELCA Church-Wide Assembly news this week, you know exactly what I mean. The persons who argued for and voted to sustain the ban against ministers in same-gender relationships quoted the same few passages that everyone quotes who is opposed to gay rights—passages that ignore the fact that the contexts in which those ancient passages emerged were wildly different from the context in which 21st Century Lutheran pastors now live.⁴

Pick any modern cultural topic and any biblical literalist, and the biblical literalist will brush over thousands of years of history, and thousands of miles of geographic distance, and try to tell you that they know exactly what a particular passage means about a particular situation, even though they know very little about the context out of which a passage emerged, and possibly not that much more about the modern context in which they are trying to apply said passage.

So, before I explain the importance of context with regard to today's passage, I will say a bit more about the passage itself.

III

I Kings 8 is known as "Solomon's Prayer of Dedication," which the king delivered at the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem. The prayer was delivered after the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the Temple. (The Ark, you may recall, was the box in

⁴ I.e., Levite priests and the Apostle Paul opposed same-sex relationships, because the only models that they knew were associated with abusive battlefield behavior and foreign cults, for example.

which the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments were stored.) Prior to the construction of the Temple, the Ark was kept inside a tent.

If you were in worship about six weeks ago, you may recall our reflections on the reign of Solomon's father, David, who envisioned the Jerusalem Temple which Solomon later built. The Temple, which David envisioned, remained a dream partly in response to David's hubris, and partly because God had a different plan. God's plan for David was that God would make of him a great lineage, and that the very existence of his lineage would be the symbol of God's covenant with David and with Israel, rather than some massive public works project.

Flash forward to today's text, and we discover that David's dream has been realized on Solomon's watch. The Temple has been built—an edifice the likes of which Ancient Israel had never seen before. And today is Dedication Day. Today's text is comprised largely of experts from Solomon's Prayer of Dedication, which for Solomon would become the symbol of God's covenant with Israel—a covenant established first with Abraham and Sarah, later with Moses and Miriam, and much later with the Judges, and subsequently with the kings, beginning with Samuel, then David, and now, Solomon.

Solomon's Prayer of Dedication is a series of five petitions, three of which are featured in today's lesson:

- **vv. 22–26**, the first petition, invites reflection on prayer, particularly public prayer, and underscores the priestly role of the king on behalf of the people.
- **vv. 27–30**, the second petition, articulates the centrality and limitations of the Temple—namely that God cannot be restricted to the earth, much less a house built by human hands—and that Israel's best hope is that God will come and meet worshipers there when they call Yahweh's name.
- **vv. 41–43**, the fifth petition, indicates that ancient Israel was concerned for places beyond its national and cultural boundaries. This petition is an intercessory prayer for the foreigner who may come to pray in the Temple, that such a person's prayers may be heard by Yahweh too.

Today's text might seem sort of interesting for those who are intrigued by ancient history or Jewish liturgies, or for the language teachers among us who can be counted on to appreciate a good dose of literary analysis; but, unless we know the context of this passage, it probably doesn't grab the attention of most of us. So here goes. Good Morning, Eden Church. This is the headline news!

IV

The context out of which Solomon's Prayer of Dedication actually made it into the historical annals of Ancient Israel was a much more sobering context than meets the eye. Today's passage is not some proto-AP account of the consecration of the Vatican

in Rome, the American Protestant “God Box” in New York City, or the UCC National Offices in Cleveland. Nope.

Today’s passage was documented during the Babylonian exile, which means that it was written down *after* Israel was defeated, *after* the Temple was ruined, and *after* any surviving worshipers were trotted off to a lifetime of exile in Babylon.

Hear that? The history of the Temple’s construction and dedication was *not* written by on-the-spot reporters before the paint was dry. It was written by historians and priests who had probably been present to see the Temple go up, and who most definitely saw it go down—down to its foundation.

See how important it is to know more about the context in which biblical passages were written? See how context matters? Without a sense of context, we miss the fact that this passage was written by authors who were trying to sort out what had happened to them and their people, and who were trying to make sense out of suffering, and to figure out where was God now—now that their nation had been conquered, now that the Temple (the symbol of their covenant with God) had been leveled, and now that they were living in exile.

When we understand the historical context for this passage, we understand that the authors had more in common with couples who were calling it quits and who uncovered a copy their wedding video while dividing up their household, than with the White House Press Corps and the military honor guard who travel with President Obama.

When we understand the historical context for today’s Old Testament lesson, we understand that the historians had more in common with the survivors of Hitler’s Death Camps, and that they had more in common with the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Bagdad and Kabul, and New Orleans and Galveston, than they did with modern-day priests and potentates and their associated glitterati who make major gifts and get invited to private dedications where champagne bottles are smashed on cornerstones, and the special guests get smashed on what is left of the bubbly.

When we understand the historical context for today’s reading from I Kings 8, we understand more fully that this slice of history wasn’t written to glorify Solomon, but to help heal the wounds of a people who wondered how they had landed in exile.

It was written to help heal the wounds of a people who wondered whether the God who shared David’s vision, and who blessed Solomon’s construction of the Temple, was still concerned enough about them to bring meaningful change in their earthly lives, and to renew the covenant that had been made with their ancestors and with them.

Furthermore, this account was included and retained thousands of years later in the history of Ancient Israel, because this story helped people of other times and places understand God’s intentions for them, regardless of the address of their exile.

Yes, this is the context in which and to whom I Kings 8 was written down. And the larger context in which this story is situated is the larger narrative of God's covenant history with Israel and the whole human community.

Both the particular and the general contexts for today's reading convey the answer to the ancients' musings and to our own deep questions about whether God might give up on us.

The answer for Ancient Israel was this: despite how ugly things may have gotten in Babylon, God did not give up on the exiles. God's covenant with Israel was not crushed by the Babylonian army, by the destruction of the Temple, or by the experience of exile. *Furthermore*, God's covenant with Israel was renewed with the exiles and their posterity who were led home by Cyrus of Persia, and who lived to rebuild the Temple under the guidance of the prophet Nehemiah.

Similarly then, the answer for any of God's people, including us, about whether God gives up on us when the symbols of our covenants lie in ruins is simply this—No!

Despite how ugly things may get in our modern lives, despite the worst that we can do to each other, or that can happen to the innocent, we worship a God who is perpetually oriented toward the future, who is more interested in healing than blame, and who is ready with this assurance when our doubt-filled questions bubble up to heaven like incense in an ancient shrine.

Ours is a God who is eager for covenant renewal. Ours is a God who can help us rebuild. Ours is a God who can help us heal. Believing that covenant renewal is possible, that renewal is possible for us, and that God has already made the first overture—this, this, is the first step on the journey to restoration. This, this, is the gospel truth. Believe it, and begin anew. Amen.