

Speaking into Being

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I Kings 8:22-30

John 6:56

Over the summer I got to sit in front of the TV quite a bit. Don't get me wrong, I was a good multitasker. I graded papers, wrote lecture notes and even knocked off a few books from my exam lists. But being in a house with cable, it was too enticing to pass up. The funny thing is my father-in-law is the same way: Wake up in the morning to the Weather Channel and the morning news and come home in the evening and catch up on the day's news again. He and I have a light hearted "spat" about these news channels. In fact, I am pretty sure he turned on Fox News and O'Rielly just to get my dander up. Sometimes, regardless of the pundit, I would hear a cackling laugh followed by screech of my name. I would then run into the room, read the banner at the bottom, laugh or roll my eyes and eventually sit down to hear the stream of asinine interpretations from the talking heads. It was our little game for the summer.

It really is stunning how many talking heads are on the airwaves today. It used to be the op-ed writer was the one to crunch all the news of the week into a brief summary that made sense of all the data. Now it seems like any Joe or Jane with a camera or computer can digest the hour's news into a barely coherent structure. As I say this about these pundits on the cable news stations, I realize I am not really on the high ground. It's just that I choose to listen to voices with no faces ...NPR. My interpreters of choice take the names of Rheem, Davies and Gross rather than Olberman, Madow or Scarborough. It's a clear double standard, the kind of plank in my own eye to borrow the phrase, I began to wonder why we give these people so much air time. And not just air

time, but true power to describe to us the world around us. Even the President appears as Pundit-in-Chief; speaking around the country about how he understands the world we live in.

It's really not all that new of a phenomenon, despite my own surprise. Our reading in Kings is a pretty clear example of this kind of cultural interpretation. We've been on this run through the life of David over the past few weeks, and now in I Kings we are in the luminal shift of power from father to son, from David to Solomon. Like every other change in leadership or culture, there is a ton of work to be done. Typically in a classical monarchy, the new king steps in when there is...well a...how shall I say this....a vacancy. But here this isn't the case. Solomon steps up while David is still alive. But it's not so easy. From the opening of the book it's clear that change is coming and a clear, level headed leader is needed for the next phase of Israel's growth. And since the country had enjoyed a 40 year reign, it's clear new things are coming...new experiences...new structures, both physically and politically. It's wise Solomon who steps into the breach of King, pundit and even priest.

The book of Kings opens with a clear ominous sign, the famed, sometimes loved, other times despised King David is aging. In fact, he is so cold that he needs the warmth of a Shemite virgin to keep him warm. Any power hungry descendant knows the opportunity to cease the throne will soon pass. And the oldest of David's son takes advantage of the opportunity. Needless to say, the prophet Nathan and Bathsheba do not stand by, remembering that the next in line was to be Solomon. In a strikingly bloodless move by the prophet and mother, David crowns Solomon before he dies, averting another military campaign for the throne of Israel. Up to our reading for today,

the thrust of the narrative is the consolidation of power. Solomon wrangles in his would-be opponents and like a good politician constructs their demise without bloodying his own hands.

Yet, political threats are not the least on his minds. In the transition from father to son, it is clear Solomon has visions of his own: Namely, the building of the temple David had always dreamed of. This isn't just a case of finishing what his daddy had started. If there can be a localized...and fixed religious cult, the kingdom can enjoy that much more stability. Solomon astutely places both his regal estate and political headquarters within ear shot of the nation's cultic center. He can keep his eyes and ears on the rumblings of the kingdom easier this way. For us good Anabaptists, this might be hard to swallow, this linking of political authority and religious leadership. Even more, the idea of a religious center filled with such wealth and opulence probably rubs many of us the wrong way!

There is a little problem however. As we can read through all of the first books of the Old Testament, God is not really keen on two things; a monarch and fixed "cultic" location. Up to this point, the religious location of the God (that is the place which marks God's presence) was a tent, a fancy one at that, but none the less ready to move on a moments notice. So here we are in the eight chapter of 1 Kings, with the third Monarch and the first permanent temple. Solomon has his work cut out for him. This is a sea of change in a matter of decades, and he must now attend to the ideological and theological underpinnings of his rule. He has to show his people how this new state of affairs is in continuity with the faith they practice and believe day in and day out. It's amazing then, to see Solomon in the new temple, the smell of fresh cut cedar and

roasted lamb in the air, standing before the Holy of Holies almost as a priest addressing the people and praying to God.

And there he is, as the king, in a priestly place, speaking as a prophet collecting all the ancient data and new developments to make sense of his new reign. Kind of a pundit like thing to do, isn't it? In the midst of change we long for people who can recast the range of new experiences, who can help us understand the world we once called home and now seems so strange. Unfortunately we today have turned to the loudest voices rather than the wisest like Solomon. All around us voices are competing, some yelling, some now carrying guns and others quietly in pub and coffee house discussions — all trying to offer the most convincing portrayal of all this raw data around us. It's not just on the television news stations or in Davidic Israel. It's in our churches.

This summer the Anglican communion around the world felt the stern rebuke of its figurative leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In his recent letter to the world's Anglicans which have neared the brink of schism over the elevation to bishop of an openly gay priest. Williams chided both ends of the spectrum for their actions.¹ In brief, he appealed to the long standing pillars of the Anglican Church, its sense of continuity in tradition and its vision of universality. Both ends of the debate openly contradicted each of these standards. Though there are points of contention with his letter, it's clear that fear is prompting much of the debate, and even some of the Archbishop's response. There is a deep need to hear a wise voice, holding up the current state of things and making sense of the chaos that seems to abound. Williams admirably attempts such a Solomonic, pundit like, middle ground.

¹ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2502>

In the Protestant tradition, as Phylis Tickle notes in her book “The Great Emergence²,” it was typically the scriptures that provided this kind of immediate authority. There was a kind of naïve assumption that the scriptures could stand as the sole authority — the element of the Church, which could make sense of the contemporary world. It’s like Karl Barth has been quoted: Hold the Bible in one and the newspaper in the other. Now, in a “post-modern” world, this privileged position has come under scrutiny. Now there is skepticism about an impartial text, any text, and not just religious scripture. Even more drastic has been the realization, reflected in the Heisenberg principle, that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted text. As soon as an individual or community reads the bible, the text is altered, changed oh so subtly by the act of reading. In some ways this opens the Bible to a refreshing wind since the text is always different when we come to it, but at the same time the pillar of unchallenged authority chips away.

For us today, it’s not about transitions in monarchs, but the equally seismic shifting of authority from scripture to...well we aren't quite sure. That's the question we live with today. What next? We are in a kind of religious change, something like Solomon's transfer of the ark from the tent to the temple. The problem is we have no clue yet. Ironically, some are turning to the religious leader again. Names like Warren, Bell and McClaren are standing out as pundit voices holding things together while pointing to a new way of being the Church. They are like our 21st Century Solomons, a little politician, a little priest and a little prophet. The irony here is that much of the Reformation was about trying to avoid the pitfalls of this kind of clericalism. At

² Phylis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008)

least we Anabaptists, who triumph the Priesthood of All Believers, should bristle a little bit at this response.

Personally, I think the Sunday School response helps us. What about Jesus Christ? Sounds a little too easy, doesn't it? And sounds a little too Evangelical right!

It is the Church, gathered around Christ in the scriptures, Christ in the bread and wine, Christ in one another, which grounds us and provides use with the authority we need. Our short verse from John captures it, even though it sounds a little cannibalistic. For centuries, the Church has taken this rather literally in the Eucharist. Though we as Mennonites, and theological descendants of Zwingli, question such physical conceptions of the Eucharist, I think the way a community gathers around the markers of Christ's living presence ground the Church more than any ideology of scripture or pundit could ever hope for.

Our ritual life, or better yet our liturgical life, is the key authority left in the wake of postmodern thought. By routinely gathering together we make a regular, and dare I say, ritual proclamation of Christ. Each time we bring the events of our separate lives, set them next to scripture and seek together for Christ's presence in the midst of it all. Even more, we bring our collective social events and do the same. By reading scripture together we hear again the plot line of God's story. Then by preaching and sharing our lives we add our chapter to the story. When we proclaim in song and silence Christ's actions and characteristics, we point to the places of need in ourselves and our society. All of this gathering, proclaiming and praying in Christ gathers together all the chaotic changes around us and assembles them in Christ.

So we need not look to the world's pundits, but simply bring ourselves into the presence of Christ so that our chaos turns to order, so that the changes around us are somehow in continuity with our past, and our speaking turns into being.

Amen.