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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
6/2/2013, Pentecost 2C  
1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30, 41-43, Psalm 96, Galatians 1:1-12, Luke 7:1-10  
Solomon's Temple and Immanuel Lutheran Church

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin with a verse from our First Lesson, from 1 Kings 8. King Solomon begins with a question:

<sup>27</sup>But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built! (1 Kings 8:26, RSV)

When King Solomon wonders whether God could indeed dwell in “this house which I have made,” he does not mean to suggest that it is a poor or shabby house. In fact, he has dedicated all his considerable wisdom to the design of the Temple, and he has lavished cedar and gold and quarried rock on this house he has made. He has done the best he and his nation could do to build a good temple for the Lord. No, the cause of his wonder is not that God should dwell in *this* house, but that God should be willing to dwell on earth at all. Indeed, the wise king wonders how God *can* dwell on earth when he is so grand that not even heaven and “the highest heaven” can contain him.

These beginning thoughts lead me to three themes: (1) If we build a house for the Lord, we should build a good house. (2) It would indeed be wondrous if the Lord God almighty should be willing to dwell in a human house. And (3) Praise God, he is willing! He is willing to dwell in a human house. In fact, he dwells among us in this house, right here and now, at 88<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue. Let's take these thoughts in order.

## **IT SHOULD BE A GOOD HOUSE**

First, if we build a house for the Lord, we should build a good house. That's what King Solomon did. You might recall the story of Solomon judging between two women, both of whom claimed the same baby. That's part of the background for the saying about the “wisdom of Solomon.” “You would need the wisdom of Solomon for such-and-such a task.” The Bible says that Solomon was Israel's wisest king—indeed the wisest of all kings:

<sup>9</sup>God gave Solomon immense wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sand on the sea-shore. <sup>10</sup>The

wisdom of Solomon surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. <sup>11</sup>He was wiser than anyone else...<sup>12</sup>He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. <sup>13</sup>He could discourse on plants from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing on the wall; and he could discourse on animals and birds and reptiles and fish. <sup>14</sup>Men from all nations came to hear Solomon's wisdom, and he received gifts from all the kings in the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 5:9-14 NJB, or 4:29-34 RSV)

Solomon's father, the great King David, had wanted to build the house of the Lord, but the Lord was unwilling for David to do so. It seems to have been the will of the Lord that David should dedicate himself to the conquest of Israel's enemies and the building of the state. Then, when the times were more settled, David's son could build the temple. So, that is what Solomon does.

Solomon was like Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. Whatever he turned his hand to, he did well. Israel did not have a lot of experience with grand architecture. She had been a wandering people for much of her history, and then preoccupied with war. But now, she turned her attention to building a temple.

It took seven years to build Solomon's design. Stone was quarried in the mountains, cedar was felled in Lebanon, gold was gathered and artwork crafted.

In size, Solomon's temple was not huge. The Bible measures the temple according to an ancient standard called "cubits." A cubit is about the length of the forearm, from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. That is 17.6 inches/cubit. A "royal cubit" is a bit longer – 20.9 inches – but in either case, the temple was not huge. Here are the dimensions:

The house which King Solomon built for the LORD was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. (1 Kings 6:2, RSV)

If we use the standard cubit, that means the temple was ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high. Immanuel is actually larger than that. Last year we commissioned an architectural study of our church as part of our preparations for the Roof Project. The report includes this information:

The church was designed in an austere Gothic Revival style, and takes many cues from contemporary German ecclesiastic architecture. The current edifice fills the lot at 100'-8" long on the Lexington Avenue side, by 62' long on

the East 88th Street side, according to the 1885 building application. It soars to well over 150' tall at the steeple-top cross. (*Exterior Existing Conditions Report*, March 2012, by John G. Waite Associates, Architects PLLC)

So, Immanuel is probably larger than Solomon's temple.

Note that we are talking now about *Solomon's* temple—not King Herod's temple from the days of Jesus. Solomon's temple lasted for almost four centuries (from 960 BC to 587 BC), but then was destroyed by the Babylonians. It was rebuilt later, and then much expanded by King Herod. That temple was then finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

Going back to Solomon's Temple, it might have been small, but it was a gem. It was divided into three areas: the portico, the great worship hall, and the sanctuary, also called the "Holy of Holies," where the ark of the covenant was located. Let me read the Bible's description of the Holy of Holies, especially of the carved cherubim who guarded the ark of the covenant:

<sup>23</sup>In the inner sanctuary [Solomon] made two cherubim of olivewood, each ten cubits high. <sup>24</sup>Five cubits was the length of one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the length of the other wing of the cherub; it was ten cubits from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other. <sup>25</sup>The other cherub also measured ten cubits; both cherubim had the same measure and the same form. <sup>26</sup>The height of one cherub was ten cubits, and so was that of the other cherub. <sup>27</sup>He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house; and the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one touched the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; their other wings touched each other in the middle of the house. <sup>28</sup>And he overlaid the cherubim with gold. <sup>29</sup>He carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms. <sup>30</sup>The floor of the house he overlaid with gold in the inner and outer rooms. (1 Kings 6:23-30, RSV)

The palm trees and the open flowers reminded people of the garden of Eden.

Altogether, I think Solomon accomplished my rule: If you build a house for God, you should build a good house.

And that brings me to our house of the Lord in this the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our congregation. I do believe that when our Lutheran ancestors built this house, they built a very fine house indeed.

Consider the striking wooden trusses in our ceiling high over our heads – those big wooden beams up there. We have some uplighting on them, they are so beautiful. But, as you might know, they were not meant to be seen. For the first eighty years, they were hidden from sight by an immense plaster ceiling. So, those beams could have been installed in disorderly and sloppy ways. Who would have known, so long as they worked okay? But the generation of craftsmen who built this church seems to have lived by the principle that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing right the first time.

By the way, those supporting beams up there are strong! The structural engineers preparing for our roof project have been impressed by how strong our church is – both in the steeple and in the nave. These beams are what is called “old-growth timber” – perhaps even “first-growth timber.”<sup>1</sup> That means that the wood in those beams was from old trees. The trees were not hurried along into some stage of maturity and then cut. No, they were old trees when they were cut, and in the intervening century our beams have become even harder. Someone said that we could hang a 747 jet from our beams, they are so strong. So, I guess we do not need to worry about the weight of the roof system we are planning.

Likewise, notice the woodwork throughout our church. I’ve included a photo of some of the woodwork in our chancel:

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<sup>1</sup> Timber from a forest that has not been previously logged



All of this woodwork was done before the days of power tools. I imagine the woodworkers in their shop. They build a template to guide their hand-powered router. They build the decorative crosses one by one. They use a hand-power drill to drill a circular hole in the wood and perhaps chisel out the remaining wood. They insert the decorative cross and glue it in place and move on to the next ones. They build up the panels piece by piece with molding and various layers of wood. All has been measured very precisely. Then it is brought to our

church and installed. Let your eyes linger in our chancel sometime and notice all the fine woodwork, so painstakingly done.

Meanwhile, granite is quarried in Maine, slate is quarried in Pennsylvania, old-growth timber is cut, perhaps from upstate. Supplies are shipped to Immanuel where skilled craftsmen finish each piece and fit it into place.

And then there is our hand carved altar piece, which thrills us and all visitors to this very day.

I say that we have received a wonderful house of the Lord from our Lutheran ancestors. They too lived by the rule, if you build a house for the Lord, you should build a good house.

That is how it has always been through the centuries. Peasants and humble country folk who lived in bare-bone cottages and apartments have always sacrificed to put the best they could into their churches. The city churches and cathedrals might have gold and gems, while the poor country churches might have had wood and wool and linen, but it was the best wood and wool and linen they could afford and often better than the people had in their own homes.

## **WONDER OF WONDERS**

My second theme is that King Solomon is right to be awe-struck by the notion that the Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, should be content to dwell in our house made by humans. Make those houses as glorious as you want, they little compare to heaven. How can we ever match streets of gold so pure they are translucent? Our choirs here at Immanuel are heavenly, but those in heaven itself are even more heavenly, also with angelic voices and lots of them. Chief of all, how can a holy God, in whom there is no trace of sin at all, be content to dwell among us -- a human race too much afflicted with sin and unrighteousness? I mean, you and I might read the newspaper, be appalled by the meanness and cruelty of which we humans are capable, and wish we could live in a better world. But God can do more than "wish" to be in a better world. He can simply go there. He does not need to get up in the morning, turn on the radio, and hear about the latest outrage. He simply does not have to do that! And so Solomon is right to be amazed at the willingness of Almighty God, who cannot be contained by heaven or even the highest of heavens, being willing to dwell in a house made by human hands.

## **BUT HE IS!**

But my third theme is this great affirmation: Immanuel! God *with* us!

When Solomon's temple was done, we read a great passage about the presence of the Lord coming into that place. The passage starts off speaking of

the ark, which has been moved into the Holy of Holies. Then it speaks of the Lord coming into the temple:

<sup>9</sup>There was nothing in the ark except the two tables of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt.

<sup>10</sup>And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, <sup>11</sup>so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. <sup>12</sup>Then Solomon said, “The LORD has set the sun in the heavens, but has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in for ever.” (1 Kings 8:9-13, RSV)

And so it is that the people of God could come into the very house of the Lord.

And so it is with us too. It is our firm belief and our joy in believing that Almighty God is in this place here, Immanuel Lutheran Church. Our resurrected Lord Jesus has promised us that where two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is *in the midst of them*. And he has promised to be with us in the Blessed Sacrament, giving himself to us for the forgiveness of our sins. And just as important, this same Jesus is willing to go meet his disciples at their place of work, at the seaside when they return to their fishing. “Cast your nets on the other side,” he yells to them, and when they do, they draw a great catch of fish. This God who was willing to enter Solomon’s Temple in the great and awesome cloud is willing to enter our church, our lives, and our hearts if we are willing.

## **A HOUSE BUILT ON ROCK**

So, I close with this thought: We have been talking about buildings throughout this sermon. But now I close with an application to you and to me. Saint Paul says that each of us amounts to a dwelling in which Jesus is willing to live:

<sup>19</sup>Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

And so my same old principle applies to us too: If we build a house to the Lord, let it be a good house. Let *us* be a good house — a house not built upon sand, but upon the solid Rock<sup>2</sup>, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <sup>24</sup>Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: <sup>25</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. <sup>26</sup>And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: <sup>27</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27, KJV)