

Cloud and Fire
I Kings 8:1-21

To say this was an impressive ceremony would be an understatement. All the congregation of the people of Israel gathered to watch the Ark of the Covenant being carried through the streets into the newly completed Temple of God. And everyone who was anyone was there: the priests and elders, as well as the heads of all the tribes and the King himself. And expensive? You bet: the sheep and oxen they sacrificed were too many to count.

Now, if we keep our focus on the shiny new Temple, it would be easy to draw the wrong conclusion from such a big event. After all, we spend a lot of time and energy taking care of our own house of worship, and rightfully so. Standing as it does right on Highway 61, it not only provides a comfortable and welcoming space for us to gather every week. It also bears a continual, if silent witness to our faith that everyone who travels from Baton Rouge to Memphis can see. We might thus think that today's passage requires every congregation to possess and care for such a building: surely only a place so lofty, so impressive, so richly adorned could be suitable for the worship of God.

On the other hand, we might want to dismiss this whole passage as irrelevant to our modern experience. After all, the Temple of Solomon is long gone. It was destroyed by the Babylonians around 586 B.C. And the Temple that replaced it after the people returned from exile, a Temple that Herod the Great made even more glorious and magnificent than the one celebrated in today's passage, well, it was torn down by the Romans some 40 years after the crucifixion of Christ. We might therefore pity the people in today's passage, knowing as we do that nothing made by human hands will last forever.

But in order to understand what was really going on in Jerusalem on that day, we need to shift our focus. For these people weren't really celebrating the completion of a grand and glorious worship space. No, the star of the show wasn't the building, but the Ark of the Covenant it was intended to house.

You see, ever since the days of Moses, the Ark had been the symbol of God's presence among His people. In fact, it was the place that God specifically said He would meet with Moses to give him instructions (Exodus 25:22). And so, as the Ark had moved around with the people while they traveled through the desert on the way to the Promised Land, it had been a constant visual reminder that God was in fact with them.

That's why all the people gathered to watch the Ark being carried through the streets of Jerusalem to its permanent resting place in the Temple: they were celebrating the wonderful truth that God would be with His people forever. But more than that, they were rejoicing that God had in fact kept all the covenant promises He had ever made, promises that had stretched back for hundreds of years.

For God had promised to give Abraham as many descendants as there were stars in the sky and sand on the seashore. God had also promised to give His people the land where Abraham had traveled for so many years. And on the day of the great celebration, there they were: the great multitude of Abraham's descendants, standing before the Temple which had been built in the midst of the land God had sworn would be theirs. Oh, yes, God's people had many reasons to rejoice that the Lord had kept His promises.

And think about what the Ark contained: two copies of the Law of the covenant which God had given His people in the days of Moses. After the Lord had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, He had made them His own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation so that they might obey His voice and keep His perfect law of love (Exodus 19:4-6). And as the Ark of the Covenant traveled through their

streets, as they offered the sacrifices specified in the Law of Moses, the people were thus demonstrating their intention to do just that, to keep the covenant God had made with their ancestors.

And remember too: King Solomon had ordered and supervised the construction of the Temple, following the clear instructions of his father, King David. The very fact that Solomon possessed the political and economic power to complete such a massive project proved that God had kept the promises He had made to King David: promises that he would have not only a son to reign over Israel, but that his dynasty would endure forever (II Samuel 7:13-16).

And so we can see that the great crowd gathered in Jerusalem was not just rejoicing that the Temple had been completed. They were remembering how God had kept His covenant promises to make them His people, to give them a place to live, and to give them a good and godly king. Oh yes, they had good reason to celebrate.

And isn't the same thing true for us, especially on this Pentecost Sunday? For every time we gather in our beautiful, long-completed house of worship, we remember all the ways that Jesus Christ has fulfilled every part of the Old Testament. Yes, God's Old Testament people rejoiced that the Lord had made them a great nation, but we rejoice that Jesus has gathered a church to Himself from every tribe and tongue and people in every age. They were grateful that God had given them a place to live in what we now call the Middle East. But know that the Church of Jesus Christ now stretches from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.

And they rejoiced that God had given the Law of Moses to them, to show them how to love the Lord and how to love other people. And they sacrificed countless animals in order to atone for the many ways they had broken God's covenant. But as we remember the life and ministry of Jesus, we should be even more grateful that He has kept that Law perfectly on behalf of all who trust in Him. And as we remember His death on the cross, we celebrate the amazing truth that Jesus has offered to the Father a completely sufficient sacrifice, paying for all the sins of all His people for all time.

And yes, God's Old Testament people rejoiced that the Lord had kept His promise to King David, allowing his son Solomon to reign on his throne and complete his plans to construct the Temple. But we celebrate the fact that Jesus is the much greater Son of David, the One Who even now holds all authority in heaven and on earth in His hands, the One Who will rule and reign forever and ever. Oh yes, we have even more reason to celebrate and rejoice than God's Old Testament people did.

But did you notice that the people weren't the only ones who gathered to celebrate the completion of the Temple on that day? Look again at verse 10: once the priests had placed the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence of the Lord into the holiest place in the Temple of the Lord, a cloud of glory filled the whole house. And make no mistake: that cloud meant that God Himself had appeared. In a very real sense, God had moved into the house His people had built for Him. And I Chronicles 7:1 makes this amazing truth even more clear, pointing out that "fire came down from heaven" on that day, consuming the burnt offering and sacrifices the priests had made on that occasion.

So, what was so significant about the cloud and the fire? Well, that's the way the Lord had appeared to His Old Testament people so many times before. After the Lord had brought His people out of Egypt, He had guided them through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). And when God first gave His Law to His people, there was "a thick cloud" on the top of Mt. Sinai because "the Lord descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace" (Exodus 19:16, 18). And so, when the cloud appeared in the Temple, there could be no doubt that God Himself was present, announcing His approval of and bestowing His blessing on the house His

people had built for Him. In fact, the same glory cloud had also filled the Tabernacle on the day that Moses first set it up (Exodus 40:34).

But did you notice the reaction that the people had to the cloud? The priests were the holiest of God's people, having been specifically set apart and ritually cleansed for the service of the Lord. But even they were unable to stand in God's presence – the cloud drove them away from the house where they had intended that the Lord would live among them.

But they weren't the only ones to have such a reaction, were they? For when God revealed His Law to His people in cloud and fire from the top of Mt. Sinai, when the people "perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking ... they trembled and stood at a distance" (Exodus 20:18). They begged Moses to go and let them know what God wanted to tell them because they feared that if they drew near to God, if they heard the voice of the Lord again, they would die. And on the day that the glory cloud filled the Tabernacle, even Moses – the man who was called the friend of God, the man who had heard God's voice so many times, the man whose face shone with the glory of the Lord after he had been in the Lord's presence – even Moses was not able to go into the cloud-filled tent (Exodus 40:35).

So that's the great irony of the ceremony that took place in I Kings 8. God's people went to a lot of trouble and expense to build a house for the Lord, so that He could dwell among them. But when God actually showed up and moved in, none of them were able to endure His presence. In spite of all their sacrifices and ceremonies, in spite of all their efforts at obedience, they were just too sinful, too guilty to be truly intimate with God.

But that's precisely why Pentecost Sunday should be just as big a celebration for us as Christmas or Easter. For on that day in Jerusalem, everything about the relationship between God and His people radically changed. Oh, there could be no doubt that the Lord had shown up in Jerusalem again. Once again, He sent fire from heaven to demonstrate His presence. But this time, there were no clouds hiding Him from view. And through the apostles, the Lord spoke clearly to His people, in lots of different languages so that there would be no mistake about His meaning. And when the Jerusalem crowd heard what the Lord said, instead of running away from Him in fear, thousands of them believed His Word and turned to Him, becoming part of His people.

So, why the big change? Because of the work of Jesus Christ, the work of which all those Old Testament ceremonies were just a shadow, the work to which the apostles gave testimony as the fire of God fell upon them. For Jesus didn't just come to give the Law of God to us, but to keep it perfectly, living the holy life that is impossible for any of us. Jesus didn't just come to offer animal sacrifices, pointing to our need for confession and repentance. No, He came to satisfy the justice of God completely, paying the penalty that all the sins of His people deserve. And Jesus didn't come to construct a building where only one nation could worship God in only one place. No, He came to draw a people to Himself from every tribe and tongue and nation, forming all who trust in Him into a new temple made up of living stones.

And Jesus didn't come to drive His impure people out of His Temple. No, Jesus came to move into that Temple, filling all of His people with Himself. For as the Holy Spirit descends on all who trust in Christ, His fire burns from within us all the remnants of sin, giving us both the desire and the ability to keep His covenant and live in His presence. And for those who have been cleansed by the fire of God, there is no longer any reason for God to hide Himself in clouds. For in Jesus Christ, we have seen His glory, the glory not only of the Son of David but of the only begotten Son of God, full not only of the truth of His holiness but also of the grace of His self-sacrificial, unconditional, covenant-keeping love.

That's the good news we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday: God has not only come to be with us, but within us. Let's pray that He would rain down the cleansing fire of His Holy Spirit on us anew and afresh today and every day, driving away any clouds that separate us from Him, reviving us again and allowing us to walk ever more closely with Him.