

NOT YET – July 23, 2006

7th Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 7:1-17

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC, Schellsburg, PA

How often as a kid did you hear, “Wait till you’re older,” or “When you’re grown up?” Everything from joining a club to taking a trip with friends to dating got that answer from my parents, though there were times until recently when I’m sure my father might rather have given me the answer “Never” to dating – until he realized that dating is a prerequisite for grandchildren, of course.

Even as adults we hear “not now” or “NOT YET”, don’t we? Have an injury or surgery and it’s disappointing to hear during recovery that dreaded “NOT YET” when you ask about going back to some beloved activity. Check your savings account to see if the money for that new dresser or down payment for a new car has accumulated and with the cost of gas today, the answer may not only be “NOT YET” but “there’s less than before”!

Isn’t it comforting to know that even the greatest of Biblical heroes got told “NOT YET”? By God himself, no less.

Let’s review a little bit about our great Biblical hero. After Samuel anointed the littlest shepherd son of Jesse as the successor to the power-crazed Saul, we know that David killed Goliath with stones from his slingshot. This endeared him to Saul, but over time Saul realized that David had God’s favor, which made David an enemy. After many years of infighting and open warfare with Saul and his followers, David finally consolidated his power and assumed the throne of Israel. Upon his consecration as king, he ruled from Hebron until he and his forces captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites. Probably as a peace offering, King Hiram of Tyre (the same Tyre that the Israeli Air Defense Force has pounded into rubble in the past week) gave David the cedar wood to build a spectacular palace worthy of a king important on the world stage; after that, David fought and defeated the Philistines again, further building his reputation as a powerful king.

All the while, the power behind the throne – that is, God – was in residence, so to speak, at Baale-judah, in the Ark of the Covenant. Yes, the Ark of the Covenant, the same one Harrison Ford braved Nazis and snakes to find in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. David thought that this was somehow wrong, so he came up with the plan that we have outlined at the beginning of today’s scripture. If he, David, had a spectacular house, then surely God, who is so much more

powerful and majestic, ought to have a house – a house of worship. Nathan heard this plan and agreed enthusiastically.

Apparently, however, God didn't really see a need to have a house, at least "NOT YET". The tabernacle, a tent which was designed down to the spikes in the ground in a mandate to Moses in the book of Exodus, has been just fine as a home for the tangible artifact of God's presence with the Israelites. The tabernacle was mobile and had a long, intense history that of itself was a witness to God's presence with the people even in the absence of the Ark, such as the time the Philistines had possession of it for seven months.

God's message to David through the prophet Nathan included a review of the history of God's actions toward and for the Israelites along with a message for David that amounts to "NOT YET". David's son will build the house for God. The consequences of this promise to David are another sermon or two or three on their own, but I'll give you a brief idea of those consequences in a few minutes.

My great-grandmother had a wonderful attitude toward prayer. "Prayer," she said, "is not a way of getting what you want. It's a way of finding out whether what you want is what God wants for you. Sometimes, the answer is yes. Sometimes the answer is no. But the hardest answer of all is 'NOT YET' because it rarely comes with a timeline for yes."

David didn't pray, and he got at least some notion of when the temple for God would be built. But if even one of God's chosen could get put on hold, then what does that say about the things we pray for?

I've been praying for a good portion of my life for the wisdom to know when the man I'm supposed to marry has entered my life. I've been praying for that long for that time to come soon, but the answer has been "NOT YET" for that entire time. The answer may be changing – I don't know about that for sure. I was kind of hoping for the sudden epiphany thing, but since nothing else in my life has worked that way, I don't suppose I should expect a sudden epiphany now. What I do know is that when I tried to force the issue in my college years, I was saved from a painful mistake by a couple of wise women who helped me hear that God was still saying "NOT YET". He's now happily married with two children – and I'm happily single but hopeful because the answer is "NOT YET" rather than no. It would have been nice to have a timeline, but as usual, Ma Ma was right; there's no timeline given. And every time I get anxious about it, I try to remember to relax and let God work – because God's time is *always* the right time.

Now, I was going to focus on this aspect of “NOT YET” when I first started working with the scripture, and Joanie did a wonderful job capturing this idea on the bulletin cover. I invite you to relax and let God’s time pass when the answer to your prayer is “NOT YET” – but I must stray from that path to address recent events that also fit with the idea of “NOT YET” but not in that way.

What about those times when we think that God’s answer is clearly yes or no but others think that the answer is “NOT YET”?

Israel is closer to all-out war this morning than we have been since the Yom Kippur War in 1973. I have been praying for peace in the Middle East for as long as I’ve been aware of the Middle East, but save for a short span between the signing of the Camp David Accords and the Iranian Revolution, it hasn’t happened in my lifetime. Come to think of it, it hasn’t really happened in any of our lifetimes much – even the British had trouble with terrorism in Palestine prior to 1948 and a good portion of World War II was fought in Egypt. I would guess that most if not all of us believe that God’s answer to our prayers for peace in the Middle East is yes, yet there are people in the world who not only believe that the answer is “NOT YET” but also make sure that the actuality is no, at least until some country or group ceases to exist.

The origins of the hatred that prompts the violence in the Middle East has its roots in the story of Abraham, father of three religions, and in David, the branch off of which two of those religions grow. David represents the eternal right of the Jewish people to live in Israel, being as he is the seminal figure in the historical kingdom that was Israel 3000 years ago and is once again an independent Jewish country. Some sects in Israel continue to track the descendants of David even today in hopes of restoring an heir of David to the throne of a new Israeli monarchy – and given that there are nations which have expressed their opinion that Israel doesn’t have the right to exist as a democracy, you can imagine how those same countries might react to a divine monarchy. David also represents the beginning of a promise of which Jesus Christ is the fulfillment according to Christian theology. This spiritual understanding of the promise, coupled with evangelical zeal, has led to 2000 years of violence and misunderstanding between Christians and Jews and 1400 years between Christians and Muslims.

The temple that God delayed from David to Solomon is also part of the problem. Not, ironically, because of the state of Israel but because certain Christian groups believe that the temple must be rebuilt before Christ returns. The temple, they believe, must be an active

center of authentic Jewish worship in a Jewish nation. These Christian groups provide monetary and political support to the Israeli government in hopes of furthering their own agenda, which, it should be noted, in most cases includes the ultimate conversion or death of all Jews in the Apocalypse. But rebuilding the temple itself wouldn't be a real issue except for one not-so-small problem: the site of the once and future temples is currently also the site of the Dome of the Rock, the third holiest site in Islam.

Yeah.

If the reality is "NOT YET", then we live in a very "NOT YET" world. That makes it very hard right now to relax and trust that peace will come, given the current situation in Lebanon, the increasing violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's recalcitrance with regard to its nuclear development, North Korea's defiance of demands to stop testing its ballistic missiles, train bombings in India, and purported ongoing threats against population centers throughout Europe and America. Much closer to home, Phoenix, Arizona, is struggling with possibly two serial killers and just up the road, Altoona is adding officers to its police force to help combat rising crime rates.

But what are we, removed as we are from the halls of power and nestled here in the hills of south central Pennsylvania, supposed to do about our very ungodly "NOT YET" world?

I don't have a solution, but I do have some ideas for the long wait.

Certainly, our prayers seem pointless in the face of willful human evil. But that doesn't mean that we should stop praying. On the contrary, prayer is more necessary than ever as we teeter "on the brink" of World War III – at least according to CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. We need to pray for peace, yes, but more importantly, we need to pray for world leaders to act with alacrity, wisdom, and compassion as they struggle to bring lasting resolution to conflicts around the world. We also need to pray for all the innocents caught in the "NOT YET" of violence, those men, women, and children who do nothing more than struggle to make a life while bombs and improvised explosive devices go off all around them and the infrastructure necessary for their continued survival crumbles.

I wish I could tell you that this isn't the opening round of World War III. I can't say that it is, but I really can't say that it isn't. What I can say with certainty is that God never breaks a promise, even though we have and do regularly – which, by the way, is the ultimate reason for the end of the house of David and the house of God.

As surely as I know that Dena Klemstine is resting in the arms of God, secure and beloved as a faithful servant of the Gospel in her eternal rest, I know that God is with us now. I know that God is with us now as surely as God was with the Israelites in the Ark of the Covenant. Yes is what we're promised – the kingdom of heaven, or as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. Humanity, like sheep, has gone astray into the world of "NOT YET" and our shepherd is constantly looking for ways to bring us back to the safety of yes so that, indeed, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

God never breaks a promise. Let us pray now as we have never prayed before, prayers for peace in our world, our nation, and in our own homes, so that God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven, right now. God is not telling us "NOT YET" for peace. God is saying "RIGHT NOW." We are the problem and we are the solution if we but turn toward the ways of peace proclaimed in our scriptures and those of every other faith. "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven . . ." AMEN.