

The 20th century rabbi Abraham Heschel spoke of how Judaism builds its cathedrals, not in space, but in time, not buildings of wood and stone, but Sabbaths and feast days. In the prayer offered by Solomon for the dedication of the temple, a prayer for sanctification of the space gives way to a prayer for the sanctification of all time. The grandeur and location of the temple come across as secondary in comparison to the vast and indeterminate future about which Solomon prays to God on this day.

Solomon’s prayer is less concerned with place than it is with time. Solomon invites the Lord, repeatedly and decisively, into the people’s future, asking the Lord to forgive their sins, to give relief in their difficulties, and to sustain them throughout the days ahead. Like our Jewish ancestors in faith, we Christians build our best and most magnificent buildings not in space, but in time.

Solomon’s prayer—a lengthy utterance offered by an ancient king for the dedication of a national shrine—may seem remote from the worship we offer here in this assembly. But Solomon’s prayer has much that is of practical value.

First, his utterance can remind us that the prayer that we offer has a lot to do with the future before us. Our prayer, as well as his, can insist that the future become a collaboration between God and us. The future does not belong to God alone or to us alone. Through faithful prayer, we acknowledge our part in the future. We do so recognizing our sin, our blindness, our selfishness, our inadequacy. But we invite and implore God’s loving cooperation and manifest involvement in the future. We place ourselves before God in prayer. We place ourselves before God with our hopes and desires and our painful struggles, knowing that prayer does not change God, but that through prayer, God will often change us and bring about a future in accordance with God’s heart of wisdom.

I admire good architecture. It is a glorious thing that people build houses and buildings and cities using stone and wood and metal given to us by the Creator of all things. But it is still more glorious that people can shape time—building their future through dreams and plans, but above all through open-hearted cooperation with the Lord of all ages, by that risky partnership we call prayer. The prayer by which Solomon dedicates the temple is a reminder of this.

Charles Hoffacker has noted that “Solomon’s prayer is built upon a foundation of three significant things: wonder, gratitude, and obedience” (From a sermon titled “A Cathedral in Time: A Future with God,” <https://www.sermonwriter.com/>). This triad underlies the entire Bible, both the Old Testament and New Testament. They are essential to all our prayers. For instance, wonder, gratitude, and obedience appear in the Eucharistic prayer we pray over the bread and cup, and which we pray over those who are the body of Christ, his people at work in the world today. If our life as a church, if our life as the people of God, is to seek God for partnership in building a future, then wonder, gratitude, and obedience must characterize our lives. A brief word, then, about each one.

Wonder. When we allow it to happen, most anything can serve as a catalyst to give a sense of wonder. We don’t have to be standing in the courts of Solomon’s magnificent temple. An ant crawling on the sidewalk might bring a sense of wonder. Or a solitary flower, such as one growing between the cracks of a stone wall. Or a new Hubble telescope photo that reveals yet another glorious scene from the expanse of space beyond our solar system. Or what I saw at our church door a couple of Sundays back: the watery

eyes of a father who would soon drive his son to college for the first time and help him carry his clothes and furniture into his freshman dorm room. It happens every fall. But the departure of each college student is the sum of thousands of wonders that have occurred beforehand. If you don't believe me, look at the tears in the eyes of those parents. These wonders and countless more, are all the work of God. In any given moment we can be open—or closed—to wonder.

Gratitude. Meister Eckhart, an influential mystic of the Middle Ages, taught that if the only prayer you ever said was “Thank you,” it would be enough. Perhaps the Last Judgment will address more than our faith or compassion for those in need. Perhaps it will also address whether we deeply enjoyed life and whether we lived grateful lives. Perhaps on the Last Day, Christ the righteous and compassionate Judge will plead with us about what we enjoyed, will ask us whether we were ever grateful for the beauty of a summer day in the year 2018, or for the inspiring music of young voices from Camp Lambec, or for kind words spoken to us by a perfect stranger. Perhaps this is what he will ask us, like a restaurant hostess inquiring after her guests. Make no mistake, Christ provides life's banquet, and the food he gives us is himself. At any given moment we can be open—or closed—to gratitude.

Obedience. The term itself can be off-putting. Yet obedience leads to service which itself is perfect freedom. It is our response to the call of God who loves us beyond measure. Every one of us proves obedient to something: our priorities, our desires, our emotions, our finances, our temptations. It may be something that makes us far less than we could be. It may be something that sadly corrupts and destroys us. The question is not whether we will be obedient, but whether we will be obedient to the One who is the source of life itself. Wonder and gratitude are meant to bear fruit in how we live our days. The name for this delicious fruit is “obedience,” not getting stuck where we are, but moving into the unknown future where all that we know is that God awaits us. At any given moment we can be open—or closed—to obedience.

Solomon's prayer is built upon a foundation of these three things: wonder, gratitude, and obedience. We practice this triad when we come together in this place to worship God, to celebrate God's presence, as we have today. Through our prayers, we stand as royal persons in company with Christ our Sovereign. We are not here merely to obey his commands, but also to honor the words of Solomon's prayer, so as not to let fear run our lives, but to fear God.

Fifteen years of spaghetti suppers and charity golf tournaments. Fifteen years of scrimping on the present to pay for the future. Some years were strong, with church members whipping up support for the building fund and keeping the goal alive. At other times the project languished, needing a different person or group to grab the vision and pull the congregation along. A decade and a half of saving for the down payment overlapped three pastors. Ideas for the interior of the new church building were submitted to the building committee during the second capital funds campaign. The middle school class was studying First Kings. From that study the group suggested to the committee that a Bible quote be painted onto the large entryway above the front doors. When the middle school class suggested a verse from Solomon's prayer for the dedication of the temple, everyone agreed.

Few people had actually read the First Kings passage; besides, the actual building was still a future hope. The Scripture verses were to be painted ten feet high around the entryway, so you had to turn to read the whole thing: *“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant*

*land because of your name—then **hear from heaven**, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.”* (1 Kings 8:41 & 43).

Only eight months later the congregation moved from their small downtown building, with no parking lot and having too many steps, to their four-acre, one-story campus in the suburbs. Nineteen months after that a group of Hispanic Christians went to every church in town, requesting space to rent for worship on Sunday evenings. They came into the building through the main entrance and were overjoyed to read what they assumed was the congregation’s mission statement in the large entryway. *“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—then **hear from heaven**, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you.”*

When the group left the meeting—after many thank yous—the principal reason for not renting the church to them was that “sometimes we need the sanctuary on Sunday evenings.” “When is that?” asked the pastor. No one could remember any Sunday evening events. Then someone moved to table the discussion until next month’s meeting, stating a need for prayer. Finally, after the issue was tabled two months in a row, the board announced it would vote at Thursday’s meeting. The motion to rent, with proper guarantees, liability insurance, and all, was made by a member who first quoted Solomon’s prayer that now circled above their church entryway. Another board member said, “Spare the lecture. Let’s vote.” The board’s decision was...

Do you think they voted yes? Do you think they voted no? When Jesus told such stories he often ended with something like “Go and do likewise.”

How would you vote, believing as did Solomon when he prayed for the temple, *“The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple that I have built!”* (1 Kings 8:27).

When God *“hears from heaven”* we claim a partnership with God in making a future where God’s message of grace can take root and bear abundant fruit.

We commit ourselves to building a place in time, yet also a future with God.

We commit ourselves to welcoming Christ’s kingdom of mercy, love, and peace.

At any given moment we can be open or closed to this. Yet it is always near. Whenever, like God, we *“hear from heaven.”* Amen.