

Sept. 2, 2018

I Kings 8: 27-30; 41-43

Prayer: O Lord, we will study today about a time thousands of years ago when the children of Israel built a great and mighty temple for you. We ask that you join us in our worship just as you joined them, and that you grant us understanding of the Scripture they left for us. In Jesus' name we pray.

The God of China ... and Greenville

Some years ago, a middle-aged student showed up on the Furman campus to study Chinese history and the Chinese language.

Karen Carlson Loving was the granddaughter of legendary Marine Brigadier General Evans Carlson, a decorated World War II leader who commanded Carlson's Raiders. The Raiders were a guerrilla-style group who had great success in the early days of the war's Pacific Theater – when victories for the United States were few and far between.

In fact, the Raiders' exploits were celebrated in a 1943 movie that starred Randolph Scott as Evans Carlson. It was called "Gung Ho!" and was a rallying cry for a frightened nation.

General Carlson got many of his unorthodox ideas on how to fight the Japanese in the 1940s by serving as a Marine intelligence officer in China in the 1930s. That was when China was fighting against Japanese invaders. He literally accompanied the guerrilla fighters of Mao Zedong as they mobilized Chinese peasants to fight the mighty Japanese army.

General Carlson died before his granddaughter Karen was born. As she learned his story, she began trying desperately to interview those elderly Chinese soldiers her grandfather traveled with before *they* died off.

Her research took her to China many times. On the first trip, she interviewed a very old Red Army soldier high in a remote village in the mountains. The village was so isolated that Karen was one of the few outsiders who had ever visited.

Through an interpreter, she thanked the old Communist for teaching her grandfather the guerrilla tactics he used when it came time for the Americans to fight the Japanese.

The old man looked at her incredulously, and said, “*You mean those bastards attacked the Americans, too?*”

Incredibly, his village was so remote, he didn't know about Pearl Harbor, or apparently, World War II.

Now for the rest of us, the very name Mao Zedong conjures up some pretty scary images. He was the man who instituted the Cultural Revolution in China, and he did it with incredible ruthlessness, depriving his people of the most basic freedoms.

But the period of history that he oversaw is incredibly important, and Evans Carlson was at the center of it. He reported directly to President Franklin Roosevelt about what was going on.

Here's what one Furman professor said: “Anybody who studies Chinese history knows Carlson. He was really kind of a prophet at that time for American foreign policy. He was

saying, ‘Here’s this enormous Communist movement out here, and they’re fighting hard against the Japanese.’ Not a lot of people listened to him, but FDR did.”

As with so many people who have lived and studied abroad, Karen’s ambition became two-fold – to write her grandfather’s story, and to build relationships between the Chinese and American people.

We can scarcely imagine a people more different from us than the Chinese. Different land, different food, different culture, different religion, different educational systems, different ideology.

And yet, we share the same planet, the same air, the same humanity, and *we* believe, the same God. The God of ancient Israel, the God of Syria, the God of Guatemala is the God of the United States of America.

While people in China may be adherents of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, *we believe there is only one God*. And we believe that God reigns over China and the Congo and Pakistan and El Salvador as surely as he reigns over Greenville, SC.

In our Scripture passage today, we read about a time in Israel’s history under the wisest king the world had yet known. And that wise king prayed to the Lord for his international neighbors.

That king was Solomon, Israel’s third king, after Saul and David.

You may remember that King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord, but he was not allowed to. When David died and his son came to the throne, God appeared to him in a dream. The Lord said, **“Ask what I should give you.”**

Solomon did not ask for riches or adulation or conquests. He asked for **“an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”**

Solomon’s answer pleased the Lord. **“Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind,”** the Lord said. **“No one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.”** (I Kings 2: 12)

Later we read that **“people came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon.”** (I Kings 4: 34)

Indeed, his wisdom was so storied that it has made its way into our modern vernacular. You don’t have to be a theologian to understand the reference, *as wise as King Solomon*.

Solomon also wanted to build the temple that his father was not allowed to build. Many chapters in the book of I Kings describe the magnificence of the new place of worship and all its furnishings.

Then it was time for the dedication. Time to move the Ark of the Covenant into the temple. The priests and the Levites brought it in, and a cloud filled the space with the presence of the Lord.

Then Solomon began to speak. Reading from **I Kings 8: 27-30** and **41-43**.

27 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

²⁸Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God with heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place.

³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive....
(Skip down to verse 41)

41 'Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²— for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm — when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, ⁴³then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

One important point in this passage is Solomon's recognition that God will not literally dwell in this temple, no matter how magnificent it is. **“Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”**

The temple will carry God's name. But even the great king knows that it cannot contain God.

God is simultaneously immanent – that is, available to us – and transcendent – that is, mysterious and awesome and above us. God is simultaneously available in Greenville, SC, and in the highest, most remote village of northwest China, where the people don't even know that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

The second point in this passage is King Solomon's prayer in verses 41-43. **“When a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven....”** Solomon, the wisest king of Israel, is asking that God hear the prayers of all the people on earth. And not only that, but he asks God to grant whatever the foreigners may request of him.

This is an evangelical prayer. Solomon wants God to grant the foreigners' prayers so that they may come to know and believe in the living God of Israel.

Our world today is small. Unlike Solomon, we know what is going on in lands that we deem foreign – in Cuba and Syria, in Israel and Nicaragua, in China and Japan. The rising seas that are swamping Micronesia and Fiji are swamping Charleston and Florida as well.

During World War II, we feared the Japanese war machine. But in succeeding decades, Japan became a staunch ally and trading partner.

During the Cold War, we feared the Chinese because of the hordes of people they could throw into a communist offensive, wave after wave after wave of peasant soldiers.

Today, we may fear China's dominance in the industrial/entrepreneurial arena but they are also a treasured trading partner.

That is the way it goes with worldly alliances. Look at Germany, our avowed enemy 75 years ago and good friend now. And I guarantee that in another few years, we will be vacationing on the beaches of Cuba, off limits to Americans for so many decades.

The world is transitory. Nations are always in flux. When hot spots in the Middle East cool down, they will be replaced by hot spots in Asia or Africa. And I fear that when our leaders cry *America First*, they are being short-sighted, not only on a practical level but on a moral level. For we are all children on one God.

Before Billy Graham died and before the print version of *Newsweek* died, there was an intriguing story about him. At the time he was 87, frail and ailing.

He had been an adviser to presidents from Eisenhower on. While he was still an avid news junkie, at the end he regretted getting drawn into some of their political issues.

At the same time, he refused to pronounce judgments that so many other evangelists – including his own son, Franklin – were entirely comfortable pronouncing. Franklin Graham called Islam “a very evil and wicked religion.” But Billy Graham said, “I would not say Islam is wicked and evil.... I have a lot of friends who are Islamic. There are many wonderful people among them. I have a great love for them.”

And Graham, the father, showed a humility that other Christian evangelists seldom showed. The *Newsweek* reporter asked Graham if he believed heaven would be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and secular people.

Graham replied, “Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won’t.... I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have.”

Those are decisions only the Lord will make.

I don’t want to raise Billy Graham’s pronouncements to the level of Scripture, but he has a point.

If we believe that we serve the God of China and the United States, of Syria and Israel, of Guatemala and Japan, then we must try our best to consider other people, other nations, as worthy as ourselves. We must look on other nations as the neighbors we are commanded to love. There was a little story in *The Washington Post* this summer about a little church in Luverne, Alabama. The reporter spent a good deal of time among its people. And one woman told him that when Jesus said to love our neighbor, he meant our *American* neighbor. And when he said, “If you do this to the least of these, you do it to me,” he meant “The least of these ... *Americans*, not the ones crossing the border.”

Just to be clear, the Bible doesn’t say that.

In August, I accompanied a JustFaith group to the middle of rural Georgia to visit Stewart Detention Center. It's a private prison that detains 1,800 men who have tried to immigrate here.

I met with a man inside for about an hour. He was from a Middle Eastern country and his story was that he was in danger from the Taliban for trying to bring education to the girls of his country. The United States refused to grant him asylum and plans to deport him.

I have no way to check his story, and as a former reporter, I'm not prepared to accept a single side of anything. But one thing he said rang particularly true. He had been educated and worked for awhile in England, and I asked why he didn't try to go there instead.

And he said that all his life he had heard about the freedom in America.

I believe that every child in every country of the world – except maybe a village in northeast China – has heard about the freedom in America.

And yet, that is not what they are finding when they flee the violence of their own countries. Instead, they are met with detainees' prisons and separated families and talk of a wall.

In the sixth chapter of Ephesians, Paul uses military imagery about putting on the "armor of God" to stand against "the wiles of the devil."

But then he says an interesting thing: **"As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."** (Eph. 6: 15)

In the end, that's what it's all about. All the human barriers, all the detainee prisons, all the closed borders cannot ultimately stand against the gospel of peace. Let us put on those shoes and step out to proclaim it.

Amen.