

A Policy of Containment  
Sermon on 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, August 27, 2006

Several weeks ago, the *Dallas Morning News* ran a story concerning the dramatic failure rate of high school students taking the TAKS test, the test students must pass in order to graduate. A sidebar<sup>1</sup> gave readers the opportunity to answer eight questions in the areas of math, science, social studies, and English. It won't surprise you that I missed both the math questions, and bluffed my way to two correct science answers. I breezed through the history and English questions. But one of the history questions struck me as being challenging, particularly for high school students, all of whom are too young to remember a world that was afraid of Communism.

Under the heading "The Domino Theory" there was a chart that said: "If Viet Nam falls to Communism, Cambodia falls to Communism, Laos falls to Communism, and eventually all of Southeast Asia will fall to Communism." The question is: The theory illustrated above represents one reason why the United States continued to support A) the Good Neighbor policy; B) a policy of isolationism; C) a policy of containment; or D) the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. The answer is C) a policy of containment. As articulated by the Truman administration and all subsequent administrations until that of Ronald Reagan, the policy of containment was an attempt to prevent the spread of Communism to non-Communist nations through economic, military, diplomatic, and political means.

The policy of containment (quite rightly) regarded Communism as a threat to human freedom and thus a political system to be contained. George Kennan, the man largely responsible for developing the theory of containment likened Communism to water, saying, "Its political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny

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<sup>1</sup> "TAKS' Toughest Questions" online at <http://www.dallasnews.com/s/dws/spe/2006/takstest/>.

available to it in the basin of world power.”<sup>2</sup> In the view of the United States, Communism was a malevolent military force that threatened global peace and security, a global economic menace to the prosperity of open markets, an oppressive government system to be confined within the borders of the Soviet Union. Thus contained, Communism could be effectively controlled, if not ultimately eliminated.

I’d like to suggest that Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple amounted to a policy of containment. Of course, with its religious terms and pious phrases, the prayer hardly sounds like your typical government policy statement. But this is the king who is speaking, and the king’s word amounted to official policy statements. The Temple was a magnificent structure, built by the best craftsmen using only the finest materials, because it was meant to house the ark of the covenant, the visible symbol of God’s presence among his people the Israelites. The ark contained the two tablets on which God himself had written the Ten Commandments, tablets that the Israelites had carried with them from the wilderness into the Promised Land and now, at last, into Israel’s capital city. On all its journeys, the ark, like the people who carried it, had dwelt in tents, moving freely from place to place. Solomon’s father, King David, had thought this unsuitable for God, and so sought to build a fitting house for the commandments of God.

It had fallen to Solomon actually to build the Temple, and now the construction was complete. All that remained was to dedicate the building: some prayers, some speeches, some sacrifices, a ribbon-cutting, and all was ready. The priests carried the ark of the covenant to its final resting place in the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, under the outstretched wings of the cherubim. When the priests left the holy place, a cloud of the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

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<sup>2</sup> George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, cited at <http://www.hfienberg.com/irtheory/contain.html>.

Then Solomon stood before the people and made a speech recounting the story of how the ark of the covenant had come at last to the Temple and the role that David and Solomon himself had played in this drama. “Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven” (1 Kgs. 8:22).

Solomon said all the right things in all the right ways: He addressed God as “the Lord, the God of Israel,” (v.23a) for that indeed is who God was: the God who had created and called a people he named Israel, a people created and called to glorify and obey God. Solomon said “there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath” (v.23b), and that is right for there is no god that compares to the God who created heaven and earth and so is greater than both. Solomon praised God for God’s faithfulness, thanking him for “keeping covenant and steadfast love for [his] servants who walk before [him] with all their heart” (v.23c). And indeed God had kept covenant: his covenant with Noah, his covenant with Abraham, his covenant with Isaac and Jacob and now to all of Israel. God showed his steadfast love for his people by freeing them from slavery in Egypt and providing food and protection on their journey through the desert until they conquered the Promised Land. God had even kept his promise to David that one of his sons would sit on David’s throne forever.

It is a good and righteous prayer, doing the things a good prayer should: praising God, thanking God, remembering God’s mighty acts of salvation. And then the prayer takes an interesting turn. In verse 27 Solomon asks, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

Up until now, everything has gone so well: God has protected and provided, Israel has become secure and prosperous, and Solomon & Co. have built God a magnificent temple in which to reside. As the famous song has it, it’s been “Me and you And you and me No matter

how they tossed the dice It had to be The only one for me is you And you for me So happy together.”<sup>3</sup>

And why shouldn't Solomon be happy? He was wise beyond description and wealthy beyond imagining. He had more wives and concubines than he could count. He ruled a country that was on its way up in the world. And he had just built a magnificent structure in which to store the ark of the covenant, a sign of God's presence and material blessings if ever there was one. Finally, those two tablets inscribed with the word of God that had traveled far and wide and lived in tents now had a gleaming new home.

The problem was that you can't put God in a box, even if that box is covered in gold and you carry it around with you through desert and wilderness, into the promised land, and finally into the Temple. You can't put God in a box and surround that box with an even bigger box, even if that bigger box took seven years and the best craftsmen to build and it is made of the finest materials money can buy. You can't put God in a box because “even heaven and earth cannot contain God.”

That doesn't mean we don't try. We try to contain God in leather-bound, red-letter editions. We try to contain God in creeds and confessions of faith and catechisms. We try to contain God in denominational pronouncements and official statements. We try to contain God in our churches and chapels and cathedrals, believing that this is God's house. We try to contain God because if we can contain God, then we can control God. If God lives here, then we can set the divine agenda, and determine the divine will.

But the point of Solomon's question is that “in the strictest terms, no place (even heaven) can be considered *the place* where God dwells.”<sup>4</sup> As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “No, [God]

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<sup>3</sup> “Happy Together” lyrics by Garry Bonner and Alan Gordon, sung by The Turtles on their 1967 album of the same name.

will not dwell on earth ... because [God] is *too free*, but also because [God] is *too big*.”<sup>5</sup> And that is good news for us: God is free to go where God wants, free to choose whom God wants, free to do what God wants, free to save whom God wants. And God is bigger than the heavens and the earth, bigger than the Church, bigger than United Methodism, bigger than you and me. But he is big enough and free enough to create and call a people, big enough and free enough to deliver them from all that binds them, big enough and free enough to come and dwell among us. God’s policy of containment was to freely choose to come to dwell on earth confine himself to human form and be one of us as Jesus. Thanks be to God for that!

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<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) 75; author’s italics.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2000); author’s italics.