testing, confusing God whom we cannot understand or explain, whose plan we don't see, who demands from us absolute obedience, who demands everything that we have, he is the God who has given us a promise that we can count on. *We* know, God will provide.

And that's why that ram in the thicket means so much. Because God provides the very offering he has required. And the only thing Abraham had to do was believe he would. There's a Jewish scholar, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who hates Christianity because he says it's all backwards. The basic symbol of Judaism, he says, is Abraham's binding of Isaac, a human being giving up his son for God. The basic symbol of Christianity is the crucifixion, God giving up his son for human beings.

But that's not right. God has always been providing the lamb. He did it on Mt. Moriah. And he did it once and for all in Bethlehem. Remember what John the Baptist said the first time he saw Jesus? "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

It is a beautiful thing that Abraham did not withhold his son, his only son, from God. But how much more beautiful, how divine, that for Abraham and Isaac and every other one who looks to him to provide, God did not withhold his Son, his only Son, from us. He took Isaac off the altar and put Jesus there, so that in all of our testing, in all of our pain, in all of our questions, we could know that God will provide. God has provided the lamb.

That's what we know; that's what we celebrate. Not simply that there's a beautiful divine infant in a manger, but that the Lamb of God came down from heaven for us and our salvation. In the words of Frederick Buechner: "It is the Resurrection and Life [Mary] holds in her arms. It is the bitterness of death he takes at her breast."

— FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT —

No Christmas in Jerusalem

Text: 2 Kings 25

All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon — all the rest of the population. . . . In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king's presence.

2 Kings 25:10-11, 27-29

In his novel *The Gold Coast,* Nelson DeMille tells the story of John and Susan Sutter. The Sutters have it all — wealth, leisure, happiness, passion — and they live on one of those glorious estates on the gold coast of Long Island. That's at the beginning; the story that DeMille goes on to tell is the decline and fall of John and Susan Sutter, how they come to have little money, no meaning, deep regret, and a broken marriage. The problem begins when the mansion next to theirs is purchased by Frank Bellarosa, a notorious figure, one of the last mafia dons, a king of organized crime. The rest of the story tells how this gangster unravels their lives, how they are destroyed by getting too close to him, how their personal kingdom is brought down by an evil they allowed to enter their world. The narrator of these events is John Sutter himself. And so, as he tells us, he's a bit embarrassed by them, and regretful, and saddened, because this is *his* story, after all. And it should never have happened this way.

The author of Kings is in much the same position as he narrates the events in the text before us, because they are also the result of an evil that started out next door but eventually caused his people to lose everything. And so I think he is embarrassed by it all, and saddened, because this is *his* story, after all, and it, too, is a story of going from the top to the bottom, losing everything in just a little while. But the big difference between him and that character in the Nelson DeMille novel is that he's speaking to people who experienced the crash themselves. He's telling these people their own story, so that they will always know why they lost their land and their king and their temple and their God.

It was so very different at the beginning. At the beginning of Kings, Israel is living on the Gold Coast themselves. Solomon has taken over the throne from his father David. He's walking with the Lord, and the Lord is blessing him with wealth and honor and wisdom. And Solomon builds the most luxurious temple anyone in Israel has ever heard of, so that the

Lord may have glory and honor as the only God of the Jewish people. Solomon goes on to build a palace for himself, his own Taj Mahal. And Israel possesses most of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Everything is just like it's supposed to be.

And the Lord tells Solomon: "If you will walk before me . . . , with integrity of heart and uprightness, . . . I will establish your royal throne forever. . . . But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them" (1 Kings 9:4-7). And everything is glorious, until we turn a few pages and get our first hint that Solomon's commitment is not everything that it could be: "King Solomon loved many foreign women . . ." (11:1).

So ten of the twelve tribes are taken from Solomon's son and become Israel; David's line is left to rule only Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. Israel's kings abandon the Lord and give the people idols to worship. Then even in Judah and Jerusalem, the author of Kings tells us, they put altars to other gods "on every high hill and under every green tree," and the people "committed all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel" (1 Kings 14:23-24).

And from there it only gets worse. The kings in Judah, the descendants of David, do all kinds of evil in the sight of the Lord. Sometimes a king comes along who cleans things up, but none of them gets rid of that evil next door, and few of them even try. Finally, there is a king so evil that the Lord will take no more, and he vows that he "will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down" (2 Kings 21:13).

And that is the story of Kings. It's the story of four hundred years of flirting with evil. It's the story of forty-one kings, most of whom care only about power and wealth and women and little about anything else, especially God. It's the story of a people seduced by a different and exciting way to live till they hardly remember who they are. And because of all this, the only people of God who are left, the nation of Judah, is hurtling toward destruction, toward collapse, toward apocalypse. And by the time of 2 Kings 24-25 the apocalypse is now. It lasts too long for us even to read it all in one sitting.

In its dying moments, Jerusalem's kings are a dime a dozen. Except they're not worth even that. Jehoahaz rules for three months, is taken prisoner by Egypt, and dies in chains. Jehoiakim dies with Jerusalem surrounded by the Babylonian army. His son Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, rules for three months before the Babylonians get through and chain him up in Babylon for the next forty years. They're running things now, so they put Zedekiah on the throne. But he thinks he can make it on his own. Which

brings us to our passage this morning: Zedekiah has rebelled, and Nebuchadnezzar's army is coming after Jerusalem one last time.

This Advent we've dealt with some difficult situations, situations in which hope was at a premium, but it doesn't get much worse than this, because the Jewish people who know the Lord know him only in one place — in Jerusalem, in that beautiful temple put together by Solomon. So when they're taken 400 miles away to Babylon, they're also taken 400 miles away from the Lord. That's why we read in Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." It's not just their home that they're losing; it's their faith, it's their people, it's their future, it's their *God*.

And this chapter makes that perfectly clear. The last three legitimate kings are either killed by other nations or jailed by them. The fourth, Zedekiah, is forced to watch the murder of his sons, the ones who are supposed to sit on his throne, before his eyes are put out, and he's carried off to Babylon. But it doesn't stop there. This destruction is absolute.

The walls of Jerusalem are torn down. The leaders of the people, the best of the priests, and the nobles of the city are executed by the king of Babylon. The rest are shipped off to exile. The only ones left are the very poor, who will farm the area for the Babylonians. The city is gutted by fire, the temple is completely destroyed, and the beautiful items set there by Solomon — the bronze pillars, the wick trimmers, the dishes, the sprinkling bowls — are carried off by soldiers of another god in their backpacks. The vessels of the Lord end up decorating the pawn shops of Babylon — scrap metal. After twenty-one verses of detailed description of the destruction, the narrator sums it all up for us: "So Judah went into exile out of its land."

There is no more Judah. All the treasures of Solomon — the temple, the palace, the riches, the land, the people — all of it is gone. There is no more Judah, there is no more people of God. And our author makes that clear, even in his calendar. Up until now everything in the book has been dated in terms of the Jewish kings: "In the tenth year of King Hezekiah of Judah. . . . In the fifteenth year of Ahab king of Israel." But now, in verse 8, we're told that it's "In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month — which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon — " that they came to Jerusalem and set fire to the temple of the Lord. Now we're on Babylonian time. Judah is gone.

And the last report from Jerusalem in the book of Kings makes that abundantly clear: "Then all the people, high and low and the captains of the forces set out and went to Egypt; for they were afraid" (v. 26). The un-

imaginable has happened: the exodus that put them in this land has been undone. They're back on their way to Egypt, running for their lives, without their land, their freedom, their hope. Because they abandoned the God who had brought them out of their slavery a thousand years before, they're going back to their slavery.

And that's what Kings is about. It's a description of how the people of God lost everything they had, how they went from the glory of Solomon to the shame of Zedekiah. The writer of Kings wants his people to know that it wasn't Babylon or Egypt or anybody else who took it all away. It wasn't Egypt or Babylon; it was the Lord their God.

God is behind this exile. It has been clear from God's warning to Solomon, "If you turn from me, I will cut off Israel," to the days of the evil king Manasseh, when the Lord declares, "I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle" (2 Kings 21:12), to the end of 2 Kings 24, where it says, "Indeed, Jerusalem and Judah so angered the Lord that he expelled them from his presence." The one responsible for the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of Judah, is God himself.

And that's what Kings is about. It's about a God who will not wait forever, a God who will defend his honor and defeat his enemies, a God who will punish sin. The God who refuses to explain himself to Job and the God who tests Abraham is also the God who judges his people when they turn away from him, when they fail him.

Once again God proves himself to be something other than the nice, easy-going, just wanting to get along with everybody sort of God that's so popular in our land. Once again he proves himself to be truly God, and that is not something we can ever take lightly. Because this God is our God; the God of 2 Kings 25 is the God of Luke 2. And we fool ourselves if we think frolicking with evil, sending our devotion elsewhere, giving him just a part of us, doesn't matter to him. He brought Israel out of the house of slavery, out of Egypt – but when they abandoned him, he sent them back. Our God is a God who judges his people.

Back in Deuteronomy 28:47, the Lord had warned that if these people did not serve him completely, they would then serve their enemies, and they would suffer as they did it. Kings proves the truth of that warning. It describes how, when the people did not serve him, the Lord sent them to serve others. So that's where it should end. That was the deal: if the people serve him, the Lord is with them. They failed. So he abandoned them. End of story.

But it's not. It's not the end of the story. It doesn't end with verse 26,

with the rest of the Jews fleeing to Egypt in fear. It doesn't end with that day in Jerusalem. Instead, Kings ends thirty-some years later, and hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. It ends not with the destruction of the entire nation, but with the release of one person.

It seems that old King Jehoiachin, the last legitimate ruler of Judah, is still alive. And after being kept in a cell for thirty-seven years, Jehoiachin is released and given a place of honor at the king's table. He trades in his prison clothes for a fancy robe, and the king of Babylon supports him for the rest of his life. And *that's* how Kings ends – not with a description of the rest of the Jewish nation, how they're either in chains or in exile or in slavery or dead. It ends by saying that one of them still eats like a king.

And that, too, is a word about our God. It seemed certain – if they abandoned him, he would abandon them. He would destroy their nation, empty their cities, remove their kings. But he doesn't leave it that way. He never leaves it that way. Instead, the last thing we read is that the future that disappeared completely in Jerusalem has popped up again in Babylon, of all places. And that's the future, manufactured solely by the grace of God, that we celebrate here today, the future that extends somehow even all these years later, even here.

King Jehoiachin reigned for three short months but still found time to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord. But by the grace of God destruction is not the last word on him. Even the last verse of 2 Kings isn't the last word on Jehoiachin. Matthew will see to that. *His* is the last word on King Jehoiachin, and he tells us that Jehoiachin was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel was the father of Zerubbabel, who was the ancestor of Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ (Matthew 1:12-16). And that, of course, is the last word on all of us sinners, who earn only God's judgment but still, somehow, receive his Son.