

It's a Long Story

It was a grand and glorious thing, for a moment, an all-too-brief moment. David won the trust of the northern tribes, danced the ark into Jerusalem, and unified the kingdom. Yes, there was scandal and the occasional trickery, but this was ancient Israel's high, holy moment. Solomon, David's son and successor built the Temple, a house for the Ark. God never really asked for the Temple; God never really needed a brick and mortar place to call home. Instead, God indulged David's dream and gave permission for David's son Solomon to build the Temple. God was always more concerned with building a people, a lineage of leaders who keep God's word, a people who would worship God more than anything of their own making or doing. And as David's kingdom wanes and Solomon's then begins, the cracks we thought were there become more obvious. We remember Solomon as wise, but scripture tells us that he was also ruthless, "conscript[ing] forced labor out of all Israel" to build his masterpiece.¹ As the elaborate Temple walls are being erected, God reminds Solomon where God's concern still lies:

Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.²

Again God makes it clear. God is not all that worried about the color of the carpet or the height of the staircase. God desires faithfulness; God longs for promises kept.

Things do not go well during Solomon's reign, at least by God's standards. Yes, the Temple is built, and Solomon amasses tremendous wealth and power, but Solomon also fails to keep faith as God has asked:

¹ 1 Kings 5:13, New Revised Standard Version

² 1 Kings 6:12-13, NRSV

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David... So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done.³

And the text goes on to tell us that there are consequences:

Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, ‘Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son.’⁴

Solomon’s son is Rehoboam. A prophet declares that God will in fact give a good portion of the kingdom to Jeroboam, the son of one of Solomon’s advisers. Solomon seeks to have him killed, so Jeroboam flees to Egypt. Then Solomon dies, and Rehoboam is on the throne. [Read 1 Kings 12, selected verses]

It can be difficult to hear any good news in this text. Rehoboam, the heir to David’s throne seems determined to rule with scorn and cruelty alongside his obnoxious toxic friends. Jeroboam isn’t much better. They both ground their ruling, their leading in fear and force of power. And if that is not enough, Jeroboam—the one who looks for a moment like he might be ok even if he doesn’t have David’s blood running through his veins—builds a shrine to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem. And his design includes not just one golden calf but two. If anyone has been paying attention, that’s just about the worst thing faithful children of Israel can do. As you probably remember, when Jeroboam’s ancestors were wandering in the desert, they stopped for a bit while Moses went up a mountain to chat with God. While he was there, receiving the Ten Commandments, the people got antsy, and Aaron, Moses’ brother and second-in-command created a golden calf and declared that the calf is their God, the one who brought them out of Egypt. Nope. Big nope. God grew irate and vowed to destroy the people and start over. Moses intervened and convinced God to spare the people. But the expectation is crystal clear: the God who created us, the God who brought our ancestors out of Egypt and delivered us to the Promised Land asks us to worship him, and only him. It’s at the top of the list, and honestly it doesn’t really

³ 1 Kings 11:4, 6, NRSV

⁴ 1 Kings 11: 11-12, NRSV

sound like a lot to ask after all God has done and promises to do. And God expects the leaders, the kings to lead the way. It is safe to assume that both Rehoboam and Jeroboam know the story. Maybe neither is a bible whiz, but this one incident is a crucial one in the tradition. And yet, Jeroboam lets his ambition and his fear of losing his grip on power get the best of him. He doesn't even try to be creative about it. He decides that it is too risky to allow the people to continue to travel to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the Temple, so he decides to create a shadow shrine of sorts, an alternative to keep the people closer to home and less likely to shift allegiances back to Rehoboam in the south. He practically re-enacts the full scene from Exodus. Nope. Big nope. As one of you noted in bible study this past week, "Have they learned nothing?!"

It would be easy to shake our heads and wag our fingers, to write off those silly kings with their funny names, but it is a crisis that has happened over and over again, not only in the larger world but in the church, a crisis where human fear and love of power subverts faithfulness to the Lord of all. Today we mark our annual celebration of Reformation Sunday, the commemoration of Martin Luther's pushing back against the leaders of the 16th century church who were exploiting the people to pay for the construction of St. Peter's in Rome. Specifically, they were selling forgiveness, God's forgiveness, perhaps the greatest and freest gift of all. But the leaders had lost sight of the people, and of their role in sharing the good news in word and deed. Like Rehoboam and Jeroboam they had begun to see only as far as their fear and their greed; they had lost sight of the big picture, the longer and larger story.

If there is any voice of hope, any faithful voice in this dismal story, it comes from the voice of the elders Rehoboam consults early on. They do in fact seem to remember the longer and larger story, even if all they have seen is Solomon's reign:

If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.⁵

Speaking good words and service, they tell him are the marks of a good king. And those words are not simply nice words or eloquent speeches. The language of *good words* echoes the language of covenant, the promises made between God and the people, the promises David's heir is called to uphold. These wise ones know that the

⁵ 1 Kings 12:7, NRSV

grasping of power and the crushing of people is not the way to build a strong and lasting kingdom. In fact it is a sure and certain way to undermine and destroy what little kingdom is left. We do not hear from those advisers again. Their voice fades from the narrative, but their good words remain, hauntingly hovering in the background as David's kingdom, the golden pinnacle of Israel's history crumbles under the weight of human arrogance and greed, as well as short-sighted fear. Because God was never looking to build up one particular king; God longed—still longs, I believe, to build a people, a people that spans more than one generation, more than one moment.

A few moments ago we elected leaders who have answered a call to serve as officers in the coming year. While elders, deacons, and pastors hold much less power than a king, there is an important responsibility placed on the shoulders of those who say “Yes.” The *Book of Order*, our denomination's guide for how we do church says that the ministries of elders and deacons are “gifts to the church to order its life so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish.”⁶ In other words, these leaders are called not to impose their wills with whips but to help the whole people of God thrive and flourish. Flourishing may not mean that we see immediate results or that we get all the glory, or any glory at all really. Our serving means that we sign on not to enact our own vision but to seeking to follow to God's longer, larger vision, that we work toward something bigger than our preferences or ambitions, that we participate in God's hope for the future by offering our gifts for God's kingdom work.

The same can be said about the pledges we make today. I'm guessing that many of you have filled out your pledge cards after consulting your budget for 2020. It will be another line item in your household expenses, one more thing to check off the list. But as you hand in your commitment, your covenant, your good word of promise for the coming year, I invite you to reflect on how this commitment differs from others. This is not a fee for the golf club or a subscription renewal to public radio. This is not a transaction. It does not buy you grace or forgiveness or love. Those are already yours, freely given, endlessly offered. No this is a gift toward something bigger than yourself, larger than your family, broader than your neighborhood, more expansive than your nation, and wider-reaching than any one congregation. Your good word, your promise on that card invests

⁶ PC(USA) *Book of Order* 2019-2021, G-2.0102.

you in God's longer and larger story in a tangible way. Yes, your pledges keep the lights on and support Wednesday Night Live and the chime choir, but those are simply pieces of God's longer and larger story, a story that stretches far beyond us, but a story which by the grace of God includes us, too. God's story is not a game of whips and bravado; God's story is one of mercy, courage, compassion, grace, love, service, and justice. And God's story has a part for all of God's children to play—kings and advisers, acolytes and ushers, football players and ballerinas, elders, deacons, and occasional pew-sitters alike. We are united and gathered by God's good Word in Jesus Christ, the ageless love of God made flesh so that we might understand God's never ending love for us, and for all.

I recently came across a poem often attributed to the Roman Catholic Archbishop Óscar Romero who was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating mass in El Salvador. The poem is entitled, "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own":

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything

and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something,

and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders,

ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.⁷

The story of Rehoboam and Jeroboam will likely not go down as a favorite for many; it does not usually make the cut when children's story bibles are compiled, and yet it is a crucial piece of our understanding of the

⁷ <http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/romero-prayer>

dividing of the kingdom and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. It is a crucial moment in the longer, larger story, our longer, larger story. It serves as a cautionary tale of greed and grasping, and yet it speaks a good word to us, too, if we are willing to listen to the voices of those long-forgotten advisers. That good word is one that never falls out of favor, one that lifts us beyond our navel gazing and our hand wringing ways. This good word draws us into the life of the Word that is greater than we are, the Word that claims us as his own, the Word who calls to us across the ages. This Word invites us to plant seeds and lay foundations, to stand up and speak out, to offer our own good word to the world in his name and for his sake.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.