

Generation B

This morning's text brings us right to the very edge of the collapse of the kingdom. Israel to the north lies in shambles. The southern kingdom of Judah and its teetering capital Jerusalem are on the brink. And quite a bit of this bad news can be blamed on bad kings. One of those bad kings is Manasseh. In fact, on the list of bad kings, Manasseh has the dubious honor of being considered the worst. The son of Hezekiah—one of the few kings on the good list—Manasseh enthusiastically restores the worship of Baal and Asherah, cozies up to Assyria, and persecutes prophets. Because of his horrific unfaithfulness, God declares, "I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down."¹ Manasseh's son Amon is not much better, but Amon only survives for two years, somewhat limiting the damage he could do. His son Josiah is then left to rule next.

[2 Kings 22 and 23, selected verses]

I know it is nothing new, but the ongoing battles between the generations have started to wear thin, at least with me. Maybe it is because I happen to be partial to members of the Greatest Generation as well as Boomers and Millennials and Generation Z. Maybe it's because I'm part of Generation X which gets left off of every list, but the recent wave of blaming the demise of everything we hold sacred on one generation and the response of epic eye rolls and #okboomer hashtags from another leaves me sad and weary. Yes, the world is a mess. Yes, we are grieving much of what came before, but there is ample blame to be shared. Even my blip of a generation cannot be left off that list. And I'm not sure the blame game is getting us anywhere helpful or good. Besides, if anyone has a right to blame the generations that came before, it would be Josiah.

Somehow this boy turned king is different from his daddy and his granddaddy. We are not told why, just that from early on he does what is right in the sight of the Lord. He begins his reign at the age of 8. 8! He is a third grader, and he knows right from wrong. Truth be told, most third graders I know do, too. As well as first graders. Even preschoolers know what is fair and what is right, even if they don't pull it off all the time. So

¹ 2 Kings 21:13, New Revised Standard Version

Josiah seems to know what is right without his father's help, or his grandfather's. He knows that God is the one God and is to be feared and worshiped. He also knows what it is to trust and to invest in repairing the Temple, and that all comes even before the book is found.

The book—or the scroll—is thought to be Deuteronomy, or at least a portion of it, the book of the Law. This Law, as you may recall, is not simply lists of the shalts and don'ts. This Law speaks of loving God and caring for the widow and the orphan and the stranger. This Law tells the people of God how to be with neighbors and strangers and whom to follow and whom to worship. God calls them to keep the Law out of love and in response for all that God has done for them, in gratitude for freedom from slavery, for safe passage through the desert, and for the promise God made with them at Sinai. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”²² This summary of the Law is what God urged them to tattoo on their hearts and fix on their doorposts and teach their children so that they would not forget. Not only have they forgotten, they have forgotten spectacularly, on a cosmic scale. There are altars to Baal in the Temple. The people have sworn allegiance to other kings. Almost all of the tattoos have faded. Almost all of inscriptions have been wiped away.

But somehow Josiah knows what is in that book and understands what is in the Law. So when the book is found and read to him he tears his clothes in grief and sorrow. The people have not kept their promises. God has forgiven and forgotten countless times. Now there are consequences. Jerusalem will fall. The throne of David, the very throne on which Josiah sits will be toppled. Josiah sends some of his servants to Huldah, a prophet of the Lord to see what God has to say. She confirms his suspicions. The city will not hold. Jerusalem will be destroyed. And God's beloved children will become exiles once again.

Perhaps the most astonishing piece of Josiah's story is what he does next. God does not promise him any special dispensation for his faithfulness other than sparing him the trauma of witnessing the ultimate fall of Jerusalem. It would be hard to blame Josiah if he looked for a way to save his own skin or pouted alone in his chambers. Instead he calls the people together and invites them to renew the covenant, not because it will save them, not because it will alter the outcome, but simply and profoundly because it is the right thing to do.

²² Deuteronomy 6:4, NRSV

I wish this didn't surprise me. I wish it didn't sound so farfetched, but it does, because doing the right thing simply for the sake of doing the right thing seems like something out of a fairytale or a movie. It is rare to see many examples of people doing the right thing simply for the sake of doing the right thing very often these days. But maybe that's because such behavior doesn't make headlines. Simple kindness is everywhere, as is faithfulness and honesty. But that's not what sells, so too often it goes unnoticed. Except by children and Mr. Rogers.

Yes, our friend Mr. Rogers is all the rage again thanks to the new movie that came out this week. There are articles and stories about his quirks and his faith. There is also a story that wants to insist that Mr. Rogers was right all along, that people are inclined toward goodness. The author, Geoffrey James shares scientific data, including the results of a study from *Science* magazine where people turned in more than 17,000 lost wallets containing differing amounts of money in a variety of locations:

In virtually all countries, citizens were more likely to return wallets that contained more money. Neither non-experts nor professional economists were able to predict this result.³

The article goes on to say that this result lines up with Mr. Rogers's take on things, a take, they want to claim that runs counter to Christianity. And then James quotes him:

Some days, doing 'the best we can' may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn't perfect on any front—and doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else.⁴

Now maybe Mr. James got my dander up because he wants to write off the entire Christian tradition, or maybe it's because we Presbyterians are loving having a moment when one of our own is getting good press. But the most aggravating piece for me is that Mr. James seems to ignore the truth that Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian pastor through and through. In fact, the quote Mr. James highlights does not run counter to our Christian faith. Instead, it sounds very similar to the words we say in our time of confession every week, the words about all falling short of the glory of God. These words come not out of thin air, but from the words of the Apostle Paul.

³ Geoffrey James, <https://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/harvard-scientists-now-say-mr-rogers-was-right-people-are-fundamentally-kind-decent.html?cid=sf01002&fbclid=IwAR0jGMCc1-7am0Y14gi41XvLF5gV6M1ot93jNi3I97RnEWUODqyJcRi9xOo>

⁴ James

Fred Rogers understood that we fall short, we mess up, and also that from early on we want to do good, to care for one another. He also knew that we need some encouragement along the way to be faithful and good, even when we fall short, maybe especially when we fall short.

I'm not sure Mr. James is fully to blame for missing this connection. Rather I suspect the church is, or some parts of it anyway. Too often the church is known for being intolerant, close-minded, and cold. Some people, like a salesman I met this week see no difference between the church and corrupt politicians. We in the church have kept the good news of abundant grace and forgiveness to ourselves. We—or many who claim to worship the same God we do—have made headlines for shrill and arrogant judgment and downright meanness, and along the way we have turned our backs on a world hungry for good news, good news that is found nowhere else. Like Josiah's forefathers and foremothers, too often we have lost sight of what scripture actually says, about what God really expects and what God truly promises. It is not about getting more money in the coffers or more creature comforts for ourselves like some would preach. It is instead about loving God and loving neighbor. That is what is in the book. Fred Rogers knew what was in the book. Fred Rogers knew the tradition, and he never stopped trying to share the great good news of who God is and what God hopes in and for us and the world, even though he preached from a staged living room instead of a church pulpit while wearing a cardigan instead of a preacher's robe.

Josiah's faithfulness does not stop the fall of Jerusalem, but he never thought it would. Even knowing the kingdom would soon fall, Josiah calls the people back to faithfulness and reminds them of the promises made between God and them. A few verses later, they even celebrate Passover for the first time in generations, enacting and remembering God's saving ways. Josiah will not live much longer. He will fall on the battlefield at the hand of an Egyptian pharaoh. But a remnant of the people will survive. They will become Generation E, a generation defined by exile. And they will carry a priceless treasure with them: a renewed sense of God's love and faithfulness and a reminder that with God there is always hope, always the promise of a new day. And they carry this with them thanks to the faithfulness of a twenty-six year old king, a young man who did the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing.

Today we celebrated Owen's baptism and over the next two Sundays we will celebrate several more. There is nothing magic about this sacrament, but there is something deeply holy. Baptism marks us outwardly as children of God, a name we can never earn, an identity we can never lose. But each baptism is about more than the one whose head gets wet. In this and every generation, baptism is about all of us, about whose we are and who we are and who we promise to be in God's name. Like the community that gathered with Josiah, we cannot pretend to predict what lies ahead. But we do know who goes with us, or we can know if we are reminded often enough, if we take the care to remind one another enough, if we can hang on to the fact that we are Generation B. Yes, we are the baptized generation, the loved and claimed ones like our grandparents before us in the faith and like the children of all nations and ages who will follow. Whether we are collecting Social Security or learning to read, anxious about paying for a field hockey uniform or about changing up blood pressure medication, planning for retirement or dreaming about our Christmas list, by the grace of God we are children of the book, children who are claimed in baptism, children who are beloved. Generation B. Nothing can change that, because nothing can change God's love for us. This God who claims us and walks with us into the exile and into the Promised Land is the same God who cares for us and for the stranger, the same God who calls us to love one another and offer forgiveness just as he forgives us, the same God who calls us to do what is right for the sake of doing what is right, the same God who claims this and every generation now and forever.

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