

“When Reforms Aren’t Enough”  
II Kings 18 – 25 and selected prophets  
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I confess: the history in 1-2 Kings is no easy read. The scope covers 400 years from 10th c. Solomon to 6th c. exile. The plot’s depressingly repetitive: King *x* reigned *y* years; he did evil in God’s sight. The story-line bounces between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The names are recurring and can change mid-stream -- like a Russian novel in which Alexandre Ivanovitch becomes Sasha, King Azariah becomes Uzziah. If that weren’t enough, though we *know* the events of 1-2 Kings are the target of the *prophets* – Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel –*you can’t tell which kings they’re addressing*. The upshot is this: we skip 1-2 Kings, and we read the prophets independently of history.

Here’s the problem: the prophets were historic figures speaking to historic times. To give up on the history would be like reading Gandhi or Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King without knowing the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The back-story, as they say, matters. So today we will reconnect the prophets with their kings. It is fitting as we approach Thanksgiving and rehearse America’s story that we also pause to rehearse our faith’s ancient story. As we hear this ancient story, may we listen to it not as a dead voice, but a voice from our past, and a living word to us today.

Our story, which began last Sunday, opens with David’s death and Solomon’s rise to power. Solomon was renowned for riches and great wisdom. His triumph was building the Temple in Jerusalem – not just a monument to God, but a guarantee of the Lord’s presence in his capital. Yet at that same time, Solomon’s many foreign wives were bringing an exotic array of religions to Israel. The irony was exquisite: even as the Temple centralized God’s worship in Jerusalem, the Lord was quickly becoming merely first of many gods and idols. This pluralist compromise so displeased God that after Solomon died, God broke the kingdom in two. Thus Israel’s twelve tribes, united under David, had held for just two generations. Ten tribes seceded as the northern kingdom of Israel; in the south, the Davidic kingdom in Jerusalem came to be called Judah.

In 931 BC Jeroboam began to reign over the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel was doomed from the start. Once the tribes seceded, they no longer had access to the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember: the Temple was the house of the Lord, where it was thought God literally dwelled. Without the Temple, Israel had no access to God’s power or blessing. In an effort to secure God’s favor, Jeroboam built rival sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan. It backfired: God detested these “high places.” Jeroboam and every king after him were rejected as infidels. To make matters worse, they also went after other gods, indigenous deities like Baal and Ashterah, and they disregarded God’s laws protecting the poor. Soon prophets arose in judgment. In the 9<sup>th</sup> c. BC the prophet *Elijah* rose against King Ahab and his wife Jezebel; in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. the prophets *Amos* and

*Hosea* rose against Jeroboam II and his people for their faithlessness to God and their wanton disregard for the vulnerable in their midst.

The prophet Amos speaks: Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment: because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The prophet Hosea speaks: Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Lying, murder, stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore all the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

But the prophets' warnings went unheeded. Chaos reigned within: after Jeroboam II, six kings succeeded him within 24 years. Then the Lord sent an enemy from without: Tiglath-pileser and the vast Assyrian army marched against Israel. In 721 BC under Sargon II, Assyria finished the overthrow, demolishing the capital of Samaria, deporting its citizens, and repopulating Samaria with refugees from other conquered countries, as we hear in this reading from II Kings:

*In those days, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Israel, and he carried the people away to Assyria. ... [When Sargon ascended to the throne], he repopulated Samaria with conquered peoples from other regions. They did not know how to worship the Lord; but the king of Assyria sent one of the priests who had been deported; the priest returned to Bethel, and taught them to worship the Lord. Yet each one still made their own gods to serve in the high places in Israel. They worshiped the Lord, and also their own gods, in the manner of the nations from which they had come. To this day they continue to practice their customs.*

The Samaritans were reviled well into New Testament times for their corrupted worship. Now the last remnant of the children of Abraham – whom God led by the hand out of Egypt, and fed manna in the wilderness; whom God had given the Law at Sinai and led

across the Jordan into Canaan -- now one last remnant remained in the southern kingdom of Judah. God held fast to his covenant, and some kings held fast to God: Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Joash. Yet they failed to expel other gods – gods indigenous to Canaan, like Baal, and gods brought by Solomon’s foreign wives. The Lord’s worship in the Temple was not pure, and God’s anger burned against Judah. History looked doomed to repeat itself, for the Assyrians now turned their sights southward to Judah. But the Lord again sent prophets – *Micah* and *Isaiah* -- urging Judah to turn back to the ways of the Lord, lest God use Assyria’s army to punish them as he had punished Israel.

The Lord spoke through the prophet Micah: The people ask, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, and calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” He has told you what is good: and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

And the Lord spoke through his prophet Isaiah: You who make iniquitous decrees and oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and rob the poor of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and orphans your prey! What will you do in the punishment and calamity coming from afar? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth? For God’s anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still. Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger – the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send you; against my people I command you, to seize spoil and plunder, and tread them down like mire in the streets.

Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I did to Samaria and her images?

Judah’s destruction seemed inevitable ... until, at last, there rose a king in Judah who walked in the ways of justice and of faith, who cleansed the nation of all foreign gods, and remembered the poor and the oppressed.

*Hezekiah, king of Judah, began to reign; he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as David his ancestor had done. He removed the high places, broke the pillars, cut down the Asherah, and broke the bronze serpent Moses had made which the people worshiped. Hezekiah trusted the LORD, and kept all the LORD commanded Moses. The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered.*

So when Assyria attacked the cities of Judah, Hezekiah would not relent. And God intervened for his people, and Judah escaped overthrow by the Assyrians. King Hezekiah’s reforms brought hope. But after Hezekiah died, disaster loomed for the people of Judah, when Hezekiah’s son Manasseh began to reign.

*Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made an Asherah, and worshiped all the host of heaven. He burned his son as an offering to Molech; he*

*practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. And the graven image of Asherah that he made he placed in the LORD's own house. And Manasseh seduced the people to do evil.*

And the LORD said by his servants the prophets, Because Manasseh has committed these abominations, and has done things more wicked than all that the Canaanites did, and has made Judah sin with his idols; therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Judah such evil that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day.

*After Manasseh died, Amon his son began to reign; and he did what was evil in God's sight. He served the idols his father served; and he forsook the LORD, the God of his ancestors. So Amon's servants conspired against him and killed him; and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead. And Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his ancestor.*

Josiah the king sent Shaphan his secretary to the Temple of the LORD: "Go to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may count the money the doorkeepers have collected from the people for the house of the LORD. Let them give it to the workmen who are repairing the house of the LORD -- the carpenters, builders, and masons -- to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But no accounting shall be asked for the money, for they deal honestly."

*Now as the workmen restored the house of the Lord, Hilkiyah the high priest announced to Shaphan the secretary, "We have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD." Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan to read, and Shaphan read it before the king. And when the king heard the words of the book of the law, he rent his clothes. And the book that they found was Deuteronomy.*

The king commanded Hilkiyah the priest and Shaphan the secretary: "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book!"

So they went to Huldah the prophetess, who said to them, "Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will bring evil on this place and its inhabitants. Because they have forsaken me, burned incense to other gods, and provoked me to anger, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. But as to the king who sent you to inquire of the LORD, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, therefore, behold, your eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place.""

*Then the king sent for the elders of Judah. The king went up to the Temple with all of Judah, the prophets and priests, and all the people great and small. He read to them all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the Temple. Josiah made a covenant before the LORD, to keep his commandments with all his heart and all his soul; and all the people joined in the covenant.*

*Then the king commanded the Temple priests and doorkeepers to remove the vessels made for Baal and the host of heaven. He deposed idolatrous priests from Geba to Beer-sheba. He defiled Topheth in the valley, that no one might burn his child as an offering to Molech. He defiled the high places which Solomon had built for the abominable gods of his wives. And he slew all the priests of the high places upon the altars, and burned their bones upon them. Then he returned to Jerusalem.*

Then the king commanded the people, Keep the passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant. For no such passover has been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah.

*In the eighteenth year of King Josiah the Passover was kept to the LORD in Jerusalem. Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and all his soul and all his might, according to the law of Moses.*

*Still the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of his wrath against Judah because of all the ways Manasseh had provoked him. Then Pharaoh Neco of Egypt rose up against Judah and killed Josiah at Megiddo. Pharaoh Neco made Jehoiakim king, and taxed the land for a tribute. Jehoiakim did what was evil in the LORD's sight.*

The word of the Lord spoke through his prophet Jeremiah condemning the people of Judah: Though the LORD persistently sent you his prophets, you neither listened nor inclined your ears when they said, 'Turn from your evil way, and you will remain upon the land that the LORD has given your ancestors from of old; do not go after other gods to worship them, and do not provoke me to anger.'

But you did not listen; therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Because you have not obeyed my words, I am sending Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, to bring him against the inhabitants of this land. I will utterly destroy them and make them an object of horror and disgrace. I will banish the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall be a ruin, and you shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.' And the LORD said to me: Take this cup away from me. So I took the cup from the LORD's hand, and made Jerusalem and Judah, its kings and officials, to drink of it.

*So Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and the LORD sent bands of the Babylonians from Chaldea to destroy Judah, according to the word the LORD spoke by the prophets. This came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD would not pardon.*

*Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and besieged the city; and the king of Judah gave himself up. The king of Babylon took him prisoner, and carried off the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house. He carried away Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; none remained, except the poorest people of the land. So Judah was taken into exile into Babylon.*

Yet the Lord did not forget his people; and he spoke comfort through his prophet Ezekiel: Thus says the Lord God, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are scattered, so I will seek out my sheep from all the places they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel. I will feed them with good pasture; and I myself will be their shepherd, and I will make them lie down in green pastures, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. And I will feed them with justice.

It is a sad and poignant story; but it is more than just a story. This is our history. The exile is as central to our identity as the exodus. I will even go so far as to say that we cannot comprehend the full meaning of the cross and resurrection until we connect it to the exile and return. So what meaning does this story hold for us?

First we learn this: we are prone to take for granted that “God is on our side.” God is not domesticated. God is sovereign, and God will not be used for our personal enterprises. As kings of ancient times slapped the Lord’s name on their causes, so rulers of every age, including ours, will be tempted to shroud their agendas under God’s mantle. As the wealthy and powerful of ancient times kept up their offerings but disregarded justice for the poor and vulnerable, so the privileged of every age, including ours, will be prone to disconnect worship from justice, loving God from loving neighbor. And as the faithful of ancient times worshiped the Lord alongside Baal and other gods, so the people of every age, including ours, will be susceptible to whatever “gods” of the surrounding culture promise wealth, pleasure, or happiness. The Lord wants our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. As we dedicate our pledges later in our service this morning, I pray we will rededicate our whole selves to the Lord, and the Lord our God alone.

Second, we learn this from our history: national leaders matter. The ancient kings led their people to do evil, or they led them to do good; and in every age, including ours, those who hold the highest offices wield enormous directed powers and indirect influence. We do not have kings; we live in a democracy ... and since we choose our own leaders we in turn become accountable for our leaders' decisions. This week the Roman Catholic bishops instructed parishioners to consider the church's teachings on moral and ethical issues when they vote ... and linked their votes to their eternal salvation. I suspect that many staunchly evangelical pastors would say the same thing. As mainline Protestants, we do not have a voting checklist, in large part because a cornerstone of our faith is that God alone is Lord of the conscience. Nevertheless, we *do* concur with this premise: our votes are an expression of our faith ... and our votes *matter*. The leaders we elect can lead us toward good, or they can lead us toward evil, in matters of justice for the powerful, care for the vulnerable, and integrity for our nation.

Third, and last, we learn this from our history: we learn that there is always hope, even when we feel God's absence. Our ancient forebears' experience of exile felt like a horrifying rejection by God; and people of every age, including ours, have felt the keen pain of abandonment. We see the consequence of sin all around us: youth in Chicago or Waukegan or North Chicago whose poverty stunts their spirits and imprisons their future. We see the consequence of violence: children and mothers gunned down in the city, streets and bazaars blown up in Iraq, the senseless loss of life. We see the consequence of ignorance: pollution and toxic waste strangling the life from our fields and streams, melting our mountaintops and flooding our coastlines. We, like our ancestors before us, wonder where God is in the midst of us, and long, deeply long, for our salvation. And even in the midst of our wondering ... even in the midst of our pain ... even in the midst of our exile, there is hope. For the Lord, our God, can never let us go.

Hear the word of the Lord as it comes to the prophet Jeremiah to God's people in exile:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – the covenant that they broke, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. Amen.