

1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29 23rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST A Kingdom Divided

When we left David a couple of weeks ago, we learned that David was Yaweh's chosen king, anointed by the prophet Samuel. David successfully united the twelve tribes of Israel. With Yaweh's guidance, David chose Jerusalem as his capital city in the united kingdom and brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

The reigns of David and his son Solomon could be considered a golden age in Israel, much like Britain during the time of Queen Victoria. The small nation was becoming an important player in geopolitics and becoming richer than it ever had ever been. David was also successful on the battlefield.

There were downsides to David's rule. His affair (or some would say rape) with Bathsheba, and subsequent murder of her husband Uriah, is a dark stain on David's legacy. David worked to decimate King Saul's family to ensure no usurpers take the throne. Michal, his wife (and Saul's daughter), never had children with David, so he had other relatives of Saul murdered. The royal lineage of Saul was destroyed with David's blessing.

Under David a split started to form between those in the countryside and those linked to the royal family. This is a problem that would be a bigger issue under his son, Solomon, and even more so under his grandson, Rehoboam.

If David was the warrior-king, then Solomon could be considered the philosopher-king. Under Solomon's rule, the public works projects took place as did the building of the Temple for the Ark of the Covenant.

Israel becomes a major power, and the people, at least the ruling class, live in a time of prosperity.

But, like his father, there were downsides to his rule. Solomon married many foreign women, and over time, he started to worship the gods of his wives. This angers God who tells Solomon that his actions will lead to the kingdom being split in two; with one half ruled by one of his servants.

The strains that existed in the Jewish kingdom became evident during the lifetime of King Solomon. The Jewish people, by nature, are very difficult to unite. They are fiercely independent and independent-minded. The unity that existed during the reigns of Kings Saul, David and Solomon was not artificial, but it depended upon the grandeur of the leader's personality. Ordinary leaders are incapable of holding the Jewish people together. Unfortunately, the Sauls, Davids and Solomons of the world are rare. That is why most of the time the Jewish people do not find themselves united.

By Solomon's time, the Jewish people had defeated their enemies, built the Temple, developed a burgeoning economy, became the centre of the civilized world and achieved peace. They had reached their zenith. The problem with reaching the top is that the only way to go from there is down.

It only took a few years after the death of Solomon for the Jewish kingdom to divide and become two irrevocably separate kingdoms. The ten northern tribes made their own government and were called Israel with their capital the city of Samaria. The two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, remained loyal to the House of David centred in Jerusalem. They became known as the kingdom of Judea.

The event that Jewish Tradition marks as the beginning of the end for the Jewish kingdom was Solomon's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh. That single act undermined him in his role as leader.

Jeroboam, a servant of Rehoboam's father Solomon is told by the prophet Ahijah that the kingdom of Israel would be split in two because of Solomon's sins. Ahijah said that Jeroboam would become the king of the Northern Kingdom. Somehow, Solomon gets wind of this and tries to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam flees to Egypt and stays there until Solomon's death.

Jeroboam ben Nebat would become one of Judaism's greatest villains and the man singly responsible for sealing the tragic fate of the kingdom. In truth, he was an extraordinarily gifted, superior person with an abundance of charisma. He was also a great organizer and, above all, a magnificent scholar.

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king. He was young, vain, unaccomplished, overbearing and prone to follow bad advice. Now that Rehoboam was king, it was safe for Jeroboam to come home. When Rehoboam arrives at Shechem, the people petition the new king for relief.

Now Shechem was the wrong place for Rehobaom to become king. God had told Solomon that Rehobaom would not rule all Israel. From the early years after the settlement of Israel in Canaan, there had been jealousy between the two most powerful tribes, Ephraim and Judah. Solomon's son Rehoboam was the rightful successor to the throne, but northern Israel did not support him.

Rehoboam was opposing God's plans. God had chosen Jerusalem to

be his holy city. God's temple was there. Jerusalem was the capital city for David's family to rule. Rehoboam should have become king there. Apart from the fact that the tribes had no right to choose at their pleasure a different king from the one who was the lawful heir to the throne of David, the very circumstance that the tribes who were discontented with Solomon's government did not come to Jerusalem to pay homage to Rehoboam, but chose Shechem as the place of meeting.

This national meeting in which Rehoboam sought a vote of confidence was an important event. Life in Israel was never to be the same again. Rehoboam was foolish. He did not want God's advice. Rehoboam did not pray. He did not even ask for a prophet or priest to advise him. Rehoboam only cared about his own power.

In the north, in Israel, before there was to be an acclamation of any son of Solomon, there must be some plain talk about certain policies of state which the men of the northern hills and valley thought discriminatory if not unbearable. Forced labour gangs for royal building projects simply must not continue. Heavy and inequitable taxation favouring Judah would have to be modified. The new king would either have to find other ways to carry out his personal and imperial ambitions or else temper his desires. In any case, the northern tribes were clearly unwilling to bear the brunt of the monarchical burden. Underlying these real grievances was the reviving strength of the tribal elders. Solomon had not completely destroyed their power after all.

The people had been forced to work long hours and were being taxed exorbitantly. Nevertheless, if Rehoboam had put the peoples' best interests first they would have followed him. But, if he was going to continue to exploit and tax the people heavily for his own grandiose

pleasures, then they did not want him. King Rehoboam hears this and tells the public to come back in three days.

Rehoboam then goes to two sets of advisors. The first were the elders, people who served King Solomon. The elders tell him to be a servant to the people and they will be your servants in turn. The prophets and sages of the Sanhedrin advised him to go easy on the people. "Gain their confidence. The throne is not that secure. Do not say or do anything rash that might break up the Jewish people."

Rehoboam then went to the young courtiers for their advice, and then responded to the people. *"My baby finger is thicker than my father's entire waist! So if my father made your workload heavy, I'll make it even heavier! If my father disciplined you with whips, I'd do it with scorpions!"*

In one of the most foolish decisions of all time, Rehoboam listened to the advisors who told him to deal harshly with the people. The saying of the young men was a vulgar statement used to show the king's power and virility. The scorpion was a sort of severe whip, the lashes of which were armed with iron point, that sunk into and tore the flesh. The scorpion was a military engine among the Romans for shooting arrows, which, being poisoned, were likened to the scorpion's sting and the wound it inflicted.

The elders who had advised Solomon were very capable men. They had gained much experience in Solomon's government. And they knew something that Rehoboam did not realise. The people did not respect Solomon just because he was their master and king. First, they saw that God had given wisdom to Solomon. They saw that Solomon's judgements were fair. They realised that Solomon would be

a great king. And so they were pleased to serve him. But Rehoboam did not have these benefits. Rehoboam would be unable to rule the people unless they supported him. So these older advisers told Rehoboam to agree with the people's demands.

But the younger men were not wise advisers. They were just Rehoboam's friends. They had grown up with him. So they had benefited from the luxury in the palace. Perhaps they never had to work hard or work at all. It is clear that they did not understand the real situation. They thought that they could control the Israelites by strong words. These young men clearly did not expect the Israelites' strong reaction. But Rehoboam liked his friends' advice. They were telling him what he wanted to hear.

This caused the people to rebel, and caused the northern tribes to split from the kingdom. Rehoboam was left with only the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin. Rehoboam did not do what a king should have done. According to Deuteronomy, the king must follow God's laws. But Solomon refused to obey God's law. And then Rehoboam made a foolish decision.

Jeroboam was waiting in the wings just for a moment like that. He was the newcomer with bundles of charisma, promising change. That is why right after Rehoboam made his fateful speech. The people came to Jeroboam and asked him to be king.

Jeroboam made Shechem his first capital city. Abraham had camped there. He had also built an altar there. Later the Canaanites had a place of worship there. There the people had rejected Rehoboam as king.

The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam in a bloodless rebellion. Combined they owned 75% of what was once a single kingdom. They also had a much more powerful army. During much of the nearly two centuries of its life, the Northern Kingdom was a formidable empire in its own right.

By contrast, Judea, which according to most estimates never had more than 600,000 people during the First Temple era, controlled not more than a few square miles of hilly, unfertile land. Moreover, for the majority of the time, they were a land-locked country without access to the Mediterranean Sea, causing them to incur huge debts to the traders that controlled the coast.

However, they possessed one great asset: Jerusalem. The Bible commands all Jews to make at least three pilgrimages every year to the Temple. Jeroboam knew that if his new kingdom was to survive he had to undermine the centrality of Jerusalem.

Jeroboam, the new king of the Northern tribes, could have been a faithful ruler, but like the king of the Southern tribes, Jeroboam had his weaknesses. The force which drove all his actions – indeed, his life – was not a desire to better king and country, but the pursuit of power. That was the fuel that burned in his engine. That was the beginning of his undoing.

While Jerusalem wasn't the political capital for the North, it was still the spiritual capital. The people would make their way to worship at the Temple there. Jeroboam became nervous. He was afraid that if the people continued going to Jerusalem to worship, they might decide to follow King Rehoboam after all and have Jeroboam killed.

Although it was God who appointed Jeroboam to be king, he was not loyal to God. Instead, Jeroboam set up his own religion. This was a clever political decision. People would no longer go to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. So the relationship between Israel and Judah would become even weaker. And Jeroboam would become a more powerful king. Jeroboam's religion was like the religion that Aaron set up in the Exodus story. Jeroboam tried to combine the worship of the bull with the worship of the Lord.

So Jeroboam decided to create two golden calves. These were not alternative places to worship God, but places to worship another god, a foreign god. His reasoning to the people is rather laughable. He tells them that it is too far to go to Judah and instead worship these other more convenient gods. He set up alternative priests and offered sacrifices.

Once Jeroboam stripped his kingdom of belief in God he had to find a substitute to funnel the peoples' natural inclination for transcendent meaning. The Jewish people had sinned with the creation and worship of the Golden Calf while they waited for Moses to come down from the mountain. Even centuries later its after-effects were still burned into their bloodstream like a dormant virus. Jeroboam exploited that and introduced the worship of not just one, but two golden calves.

He set them up at the key points on his side of the border. At the same time, he disparaged the Jews of Judea. Their beliefs were old-fashioned and out of step with modernity, he told his many followers. His movement was progressive. Through him they would become part of a greater world.

In addition to the golden calves, Jeroboam opened the land to the

importation of non-Jewish deities like Baal, Asherah, and other Phoenician gods. In a short time, the majority of the Jewish people became largely non-Jewish in their outlook and behaviour. Virtually everything that leaders from the time of Samuel had accomplished to eradicate idolatry from the Jewish people was undone by Jeroboam in almost no time. It takes a long time to build something, but not much time to destroy it.

Consequently, he had made his fateful decision and forbade the Jews under his control from going to Jerusalem. To enforce his decree, he mobilized the military and placed armed guards all along the border. In effect, he created a “Berlin Wall”. That act sealed the schism between the north and south.

Jeroboam sins in order to keep the people loyal to him. This leads the Northern Kingdom down a path where they would not be loyal to God. He establishes a policy that would be followed by every king until the Northern Tribes dissolve in 728 BCE following the invasion by the Assyrian Empire.

Jeroboam was chosen by God to be an alternative leader, a just leader in comparison to Rehoboam. But in his concern over losing power and disloyalty, he decided to set up shrines to a god other than the one of Abraham.

All subsequent monarchs of the kingdom of Israel followed Jeroboam’s lead. Not one of them was a believer in God. In Judea, it was cyclical: there were good kings and bad kings. Every other generation or so a great king stepped forward and strengthened the faith of the people in Torah and God. That never happened among the kings of the Northern Kingdom. They followed the mold of Jeroboam.

Furthermore, the Northern Kingdom never had a dynasty. There was a father, a son and then a coup with an assassination. That sums up their entire history. It was a history no different than any of the other nations of the time. Revolutions, assassinations, paganism, idolatry, empire, war, aggression – that is the legacy Jeroboam left.

Nevertheless, the Northern Kingdom was more successful in a secular sense than the Kingdom of Judea to its south. Of course, in terms of Jewish eternity and simple survival there was no comparison. The northern tribes were exiled never to return.

The schism that Jeroboam caused within the Jewish kingdom was the beginning of the end. The Jewish people never again had twelve tribes working together. There was never even a movement to reunite. The ten northern tribes eventually slipped toward the bottomless pit of history.

All this could probably have been avoided if Rehoboam and even Solomon before him, had followed God's ideal of a king - a servant king. The people pleaded for Rehoboam to look at the policies of the oppressive leadership of the previous regime. His advisors told him that if he serves the people and speaks kindly to them, they will serve him. This means taking a risk. Effective leadership is really not defined by control but by what is given, not by what is demanded, but by what is provided or offered. Rehoboam and his friends were looking to be served, they did not sign up for service.

In today's gospel, we see that Jesus turns Rehoboam's and his friends' understanding of leadership completely upside down. A leader must serve, the one who wants to be first must be a slave of everyone else, and the Son of Man came to serve and not to be served. That is

what makes a saint - someone empowered by God, someone for whom the critical centre of their life is service. May we all strive to be saints by becoming servants to God and to all God's people.

Amen.

Prayers of the People, Pentecost 23, November 5, 2023

All blessing, honour, and glory, all wisdom, praise, and thanks be yours, O God of our salvation! We pray in communion with all the saints on earth and heaven, with the martyrs and the faithful in all ages, and in the name of the Lamb who was slain, who alone is worthy of worship.

Today our hearts are united with all who have passed from this life into new life with you. We are especially mindful of the people lost this year in fires, floods, earthquakes and hurricanes. We remember also those lives lost through the COVID pandemic and the ongoing opioid crisis. Bless the families left behind that mourn their loss. Lord so many are lost daily in wars and conflicts all around the world and, as your people, we grieve for their loss. We pray for the many families affected by war. And we pray that peace will come to the nations and that leaders will seek enduring peace in these troubled times.

Loving God, we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza. We pray for those grieving the death or wounding of loved ones, for those in hiding or being held hostage, for those whose homes and lives have been suddenly destroyed. We pray that world leaders would use their influence wisely to help de-escalate this conflict and create space for dialogue. We pray for wisdom so that one day peace can prevail that is just for all people, Palestinian and Israeli. Give courage to Bishop Azar and the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land in these tragic and terrible times as they provide support, encouragement, comfort, and hope.

Gracious God, grant peace among the nations. We pray for peace for the people in Ukraine, and for peace in other areas of the world besieged by conflict and war. Cleanse from our own hearts the seeds of strife: greed and envy, harsh

misunderstandings and ill will, fear and desire for revenge. Make us quick to welcome ventures in cooperation among the peoples of the world, so that there may be woven the fabric of a common good too strong to be torn by the evil hands of war. In the time of opportunity, make us be diligent; and in the time of peril, let not our courage fail.

God of the church, bless bishops, pastors, deacons, interns, and all ministers of the Gospel. Today we lift up in prayer Lutheran Church of the Cross and its pastors Lyle McKenzie and Lyndon Sayers as well as the ministries of all chaplains serving in prisons, on university campuses, and in long-term care facilities. Grant us wisdom and insight as we work to proclaim your eternal love and grace.

God of Creation, bless grasslands and fields, watersheds abundant with streams, rivers and lakes, oceans, forests and all ecosystems. Restore health to your natural Creation and bring healing to the world so that all may share in an abundant harvest and be provided with sources of fresh water and continuous food security. Work through us that the abundance you provide may bless ever more and more people. Protect those who are poor and hungry and give them hope. Move those with plenty to share with those who have little. Help all people to love their neighbour as themselves.

God of healing, bless health care providers including doctors, nurses, care aids, rehabilitation and other specialists, and all involved in the care of others. Give them compassion, patience and endurance as they work to bring care and comfort to all they serve.

God of recovery, bless those suffering with illness, grief, anxiety, and all other afflictions and sources of human suffering in mind, body and soul ... *(We lift their names silently in our hearts or*

aloud...) Help them to feel your loving presence with them and grant them hope and peace.

God of this time and place, bless our ministries here at Grace, and all the ways in which we work to serve you as a congregation; bring us into ever deeper relationships with one another and faith in you.

God of eternity, we remember all who have died in Christ during the past year. We remember especially those saints in our own congregation, who completed the race that was set before them, and are now in your presence. We remember our loved ones who have gone before us, whom we miss, and with whom we pray we will one day be reunited.

[The names written in the All Saints Day prayer book were read aloud at this point.]

We thank You for sustaining them during their earthly life, and for the blessings that flowed to us from their lives. Grant that their example may inspire us in our ministries and lives today. Be with all who mourn their passing. Comfort them in their sorrow. We give thanks for the love you have shown to the world through all your saints, and we celebrate our continuing communion with them whenever we worship. Remember us all in life and death, and bring us at last into Your eternal home.

Bless us with your healing presence; make us hungry for justice; strengthen our faith; and increase our love for others, especially those we find it most difficult to love. We ask this and anything else on our hearts, trusting in your mercy, power, and compassion, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.