

Advent 1 - December 3, 2023

2 Kings 22:1-10, 14-20; 23:1-3

The Power of Scripture

The story of King Josiah is a cautionary tale about what happens when people stray too far from God for too long. Josiah ascended the throne at the tender age of eight after the assassination of his father. He reigned from 640 to 609 BCE, a total of thirty-one years. His family was from the region of Bozkath, a city in the lowland hills of Judah. Josiah was a highly esteemed king: *“He did what was pleasing in the Lord’s sight and followed the example of his ancestor David. He did not turn aside from doing what was right.”*

Josiah is depicted as even greater than King David. Commentaries often state that no other king in Israel or Judah has ever been more valued for not turning away from God. He faithfully observed the Book of the Law to the fullest.

The positive appraisal of Josiah’s reign continues with his concern for the condition of the temple which had fallen in disrepair due to the neglect by previous kings who had turned to worshipping other gods, especially Baal, and had no interest in the Temple. Josiah sent the scribe Shaphan to the high priest Hilkiah, instructing him to hire workers to repair the house of the Lord. The temple was viewed as the residence of God and a sign of God’s presence.

According to 2 Chronicles, this repair of the temple was preceded by a definite commitment to God when Josiah was sixteen, then followed some four years later by an iconoclastic purge attacking idolatry in Judah.

Josiah delivers his list of orders to Shaphan: Go to the high priest ... have him count the money brought in ... give it to the workers for repairs to the temple ... do not ask them for any accounting of the money. The high priest was Hilkiah, father of the prophet Jeremiah, who actually began his ministry during the reign of King Josiah. Hilkiah reports to Shaphan that he has found the Book (or scroll) of Law, that is the *torah*, in the House of the Lord. He gives it to Shaphan to take to Josiah.

According to the laws of Deuteronomy, there was to be a copy of the Book of the Law beside the Ark of the Covenant, beginning with Moses. The Word of God was *with* Israel, but it was greatly *neglected* by the kingdom of Judah, which was in prolonged disobedience to God.

According to Deuteronomy, each king, whether of the Northern or Southern Kingdom, was to have a personal copy of the law, and he was expected to read it. The entire law was to be read to an assembly of the nation once every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles to keep the law before the people. That must have been a rather long reading.

Of course, the people were expected to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast, an opportune time to hear the law, as very few people were literate and depended on the oral tradition to hear and learn God's law. The first mention of a public reading of the law is found in the book of Joshua who followed Moses. The next public reading was more than five hundred years later, during the reign of king Jehoshaphat. Then two hundred and fifty years later during

Josiah's reign, the next public reading occurs.

Shaphan reports to Josiah on the progress of the repairs. Nonchalantly he informs the king, as if it were an afterthought: "The Priest Hilkiah has given me a book." He had not yet realized its importance. It had been forgotten and regarded as nothing more than an old dusty scroll for decades. He proceeded to read the book to Josiah.

Throughout the history of God's people, when the word of God is recovered and spread, it is followed by a spiritual revival. It can begin as simply as it did in the days of Josiah, with one man finding and reading and believing, then spreading the Word of God found in the Scrolls or Book.

An example of this in history is the story of Peter Waldo and his followers sometimes known as Waldensians. Peter Waldo, (1140 – c. 1205), also Pierre Vaudès or de Vaux, is credited as the founder of the Waldensians, a Christian spiritual movement of the Middle Ages, descendants of which still exist in various regions of southern Europe. Waldo was a rich merchant who gave up his business to radically follow Jesus. He hired two priests to translate the New Testament into the common language, and, using this, he began to teach others. He taught in the streets or wherever he could find someone to listen.

Many common people came to hear him and started to enthusiastically follow Jesus. He taught them the text of the New Testament in the language of the common people and was rebuked

by church officials for doing so. He ignored the rebuke and continued to teach, eventually sending his followers out two by two into villages and market places, to teach and explain the scriptures, just as Jesus had instructed his disciples. The scriptures were memorized by the Waldensians and it was not unusual for their ministers to memorize the entire New Testament and large sections of the Old Testament. The word of God - when found, read, believed, and spread - has this kind of great transforming power.

The hearing of God's word had a powerful effect on King Josiah. It was not only the transmission of information, but the impact of spiritual power in the hearing of the Word. When the word of God was read, Josiah's eyes were opened. It contained not only the history of the nation's call by God, but also gave explicit instructions on how to live as God's people. At the end of the book was a list of curses that God would call down on Israel and Judah if his people forsook God and God's law.

The king was terror stricken. In despair, he tore his clothes. The tearing of clothing was a traditional expression of horror and astonishment. In the strongest possible way, Josiah showed his own grief, as well as that of the nation of Judah. No one living could remember a day when Judah had known and obeyed the commands found in this Book. Immediately Josiah humbled himself before God and prayed for mercy. The king had suddenly gained a new understanding of who this God whom he had been attempting to serve, really was. He realized that he had not been as completely faithful to God as he ought to have been. He now had a new vision of God.

He sent Shaphan and the court advisors to go to seek the prophetess Huldah to interpret the scroll. With the apparent approval of King Josiah, Hilkiah the priest consulted this woman for spiritual guidance. It wasn't because of her own wisdom and spirituality, but that she was recognized as a prophetess and could reveal the heart and mind of God. Yet judging by the reaction of the people around her, it doesn't seem strange at all to have a woman interpret Scripture. The king sent his most trusted officials to take the book to Huldah to authenticate it. After hearing Huldah's interpretation, Josiah became worried - condemnation was coming because the people have not lived according to God's commandments.

This story, although little known, is an important part of the Old Testament. King Josiah is remembered as a reformer. Under Josiah, the Scriptures were rediscovered, in the form of the Book of Deuteronomy. This led to the reshaping of worship life within the kingdom. This rediscovery of Scriptures was a pivotal moment in the history of God's people and the way in which Scripture created a powerful shaping force on Josiah personally and on his people corporately.

So what does it mean for the first Sunday of Advent to read the story of Josiah's reform? Today we enter the season of expectation and reflection as we ponder who we are in relation to God. Scripture is a very important piece of the Advent season. Does the rediscovery of Scripture have a significant role to play in Advent?

Hearing of shepherds and angels and singing songs will all come in the weeks ahead. Today we have a Biblical message, a Biblical

word. In the story of Josiah we see the power of that Word to bring a transformation of individuals as well as communities. As we begin the season of Advent, we have new hope for congregations.

Can Scripture have that same kind of transformative impact on the people who read it, both as individuals and as communities of faith? There is no better way for the celebration of Jesus' birth than with that deep sense that this is all part of a much bigger story that we have been given through the Scriptures. Scripture is one of the greatest gifts we can receive during this Advent season.

Within the context of Deuteronomistic history, that is, the history of God's people, the story has been building up to this scene. We have this long trajectory of the people, a cyclical forgetting of God. Despite the raising up of prophets and judges, the people of Israel and Judah kept falling back and forgetting God.

Now, we see a change. Huldah, only one of three named prophetesses in the Old Testament, plays a critical role in the story as we move to Scripture as a replacement of the prophet in the life of the people of God. As we approach the end of Kings and the end of prophets, we gain a new understanding of the power of Scripture in our lives.

Scripture will now play a greater role – the major role. The written word of God will play a part in people's lives in a way it hadn't done before, particularly during their time in exile. Scripture becomes something the King now fears. Scripture is something that the popular world wants us to turn away from, to turn away from God

and serve the economic engine, or war engine, or sex engine of the culture. Scripture is something that is so powerful that, later on, it's actually banned by the emperors who rule over the province of Judah. Antiochus IV became ruler in 175 BCE. According to 1 Maccabees, Antiochus made possession of the Torah a capital offense and burned the copies he could find.

Emphasis on Scripture, on the written word, is a stance taken by king Josiah, who was the most popular person in the kingdom. The king was standing under the authority of the Word, under the authority of Scripture. Josiah leads the people into a time of repentance and a time of renewing the Covenant. This was an entrance into a relationship with God – a renewal of the covenant God made with them all the way back to Sinai and Moses.

Josiah suspected the Israelites would incite God's judgment for their covenantal infidelity. And, in a display of piety, he calls for the entire nation to commit to following the statutes and ordinances in the Book of Law. The people will now keep this Covenant and will keep the Lord's commandments, decrees, and statutes with all their heart and all their soul.

But can they do this? No! They don't seem capable of carrying through. This is the way Deuteronomistic history closes with the end of this story a couple of chapters later. The plot is - can Israel serve the Lord? Joshua says, "*..truly we will serve, we will serve the Lord.*" But they can't do it. When organized as individual tribes, with judges and prophets raised from time to time, they just can't do it. There were two attempts for these people to be organized with kings and

prophets to lead the people. But they simply couldn't do it, perhaps because the kings themselves, instead of leading people to God and living according to God's plan, were worshipping other gods and not showing justice and mercy as God required. They were not leaders for their people.

This makes this a great Advent story as it ends the Deuteronomistic history with the question: "What is God going to do with the people who cannot, in the end, serve God?" With the phenomenon of Josiah's reform, it's one part of the story where the renewal of the people is not something that happens just once. It has to keep happening again and again and again.

It's not just: "Yes - sign me up - I'm going to be faithful," and it's a done deal from there on ... There's that ongoing process of being called back, and that's what Josiah is doing, calling people back to that centre, which has to do with the centrality of God, calling people back to that central thing. It's all about being committed to God with all one's heart and soul. It's calling people back to God.

Yet, despite his efforts, the fateful words of Huldah would come to pass. She proclaimed that God would surely bring disaster upon Judah and Jerusalem and all its inhabitants. However, because of Josiah's piety, faith, and commitment to the Covenant, Judah would be spared while he was still alive. After he died, the Babylonians struck and the people were taken to Babylon in captivity as slaves.

There is a process of revelation in this story as the Book of Laws is discovered. There is a process of opening up, of a finding of

something that is hidden. This fits into the Advent season of opening things that might have been tucked away or hidden since last year.

As we open, uncover, re-discover the things that had been stored or tucked away, as we go into our nooks and crannies, we're acting out the story of Josiah - we are getting ready for the hearing of the Word. This first Sunday of Advent brings us the hope that there will be renewal and transformation of our faith and covenant with God, over and over and over as individuals and as a community of faith during these weeks of preparation, as we humbly prepare for the birth of the Christ child with our whole hearts and souls.

In the Gospel reading, we are reminded of the importance of Scripture; reading, understanding, contemplating its meaning, and following the direction to which it points us. Even the disciples, like the citizens of Israel and Judah, needed a renewal and a reminder of the importance and power of Scripture. Jesus had to point this out to them, and put them back on the right path as they continued their ministry. We, too, are encouraged to open our eyes, to feel our hearts burn as we read and reacquaint ourselves with Scripture. Advent should be a season of renewal for us, a season of hope, an opportunity to understand and respond to God's Word.

Amen.

Advent God, at the start of a new Christian year, we offer our thanks for all the mercies and blessings we have received over the past year. We offer our praise and gratitude as families and friends gather to celebrate the beginning of Advent and the Christmas season.

Let us pray for your marvelous Creation – the sun, the moon, the stars, the galaxies, the roaring seas, the icy streams, the clouds, and all the trees This is your world, God, your gift to us. We also confess our complicity in harming our world. We pray that the United Nations Climate Change Summit (COP28) compels world leaders to work together towards actions to address and reduce the global warming impacting us all. May we have the resolve and be given the grace to save, restore, conserve and celebrate all living and non-living beings so that future generations are able to live and offer thanks in a healthy, sustainable and flourishing ecosystem.

Let us pray for the visible unity of the church; for increasing and abounding love among Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians; for our own denomination and its leaders: Bishops Susan and Kathy, pastors, deacons, lay leaders, musicians. Today we lift up Grace Lutheran in Burnaby and Pr. Nathan Fong; Mount Zion Lutheran in Smithers as well as our sister congregation San Juan Camino D'Esperanza in Peru.

Let us pray for nations in distress, especially those of the middle east, for soldiers and civilians; for world leaders and local governments; for refugees and prisoners; for subsistence farmers and small business owners. Stir in them the unwavering desire for enduring peace.

God of peace, we breathed a deep sigh of relief at the news of an extended cease-fire between Hamas and Israel. With Israel resuming attacks and the continuing unwillingness of both Hamas and Israel to accept responsibility and acknowledge their crimes against international law and humanity, we cry to you O God, 'How long?' How can such inhumanity continue when the innocent and vulnerable

are paying the cost in suffering, homelessness and death? Not just physical but mental and spiritual death and building up long term consequences for millions, here, and where all wars – declared or undeclared – are being fought throughout the world. Our hearts are heavy as we lament the brokenness in the world.

In the midst of chaos, your voice declares: “I will be peace.” In the heart of anger your voice declares, “I will be love.” In the presence of despair, your voice declares, “I will be hope.” We are thankful for the release of dozens of hostages during the truce, and for their physical safety. May every person who is returning home be reminded of your presence as they reunite with loved ones and begin their healing journey. We are all your children. May we cherish and deepen our relationships with one another.

Let us pray for all whose hearts are weighed down with the worries of this life Bring them hope that trusting that your healing power is near.

Let us pray for the youth, the working parents, the single persons, those who are homebound, and those anticipating life changes in our congregation. Deepen our trust that you are present in all our circumstances providing your lovingkindness and mercy. Keep us alert as we watch for your coming.

Let us pray for all people, especially women and children suffering from the effects of HIV or AIDS as we mark World AIDS day that was acknowledged December 1. Help us to fulfill your promises in the lives of the poor or orphaned throughout the world.

God of hope, we rejoice with the people of India at the evacuation of 41 workers trapped for 17 days inside a collapsed tunnel in the Himalayas. We give thanks for all the people who worked tirelessly to keep the workers alive, and those who came up with creative solutions to bring the men to safety. We celebrate your desire for us to “think outside of the box” as we lean into care for one another.

God of trust, we see your handiwork in the compassion displayed by the people of France. The French Navy helicopter carrier, carrying health workers, beds, and medical equipment, to include operating rooms, is now docked in Egypt, and is treating injured civilian patients from Gaza. May we heed the words of France's defense minister, Sebastien Lecornu, "We are here to help civilians. It's our humanitarian mission."

Let us give thanks for the lives of those who have gone before us in the faith. Keep us in communion with the saints who now see you face to face.

In the darkness of these longer nights may we all feel surrounded by your peace, your love, and your hope. Hear the prayers of your people, O God, and in your mercy grant us all we need, for the sake of your Son, Jesus, Redeemer and source of life and hope, now and for ever.

Amen

With joy and gladness let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us ...

Our Father ...