

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 29, 2023

So, we hope you were here last Sunday to get to hear Reverend Alison preach to us, to connect us through the word proclaimed to our sibling Church in Cardenas, Cuba. If you weren't, we hope you'll go back and watch the LiveStream of that or the YouTube—an important word for us about this new Heaven and new Earth that we are called to be co-laborers of building in the world. And this week, however, we return to The Narrative Lectionary. We're going to read from First Kings. I know all of y'all are experts in the book of First Kings, as I am, not a book that we spend a ton of time in, which is why The Narrative Lectionary is a really helpful thing for us, a lectionary overall, but the narrative one in particular, bringing us into places and into books that we don't, we don't count as familiar to us. This morning we are going to learn a good bit about a transition of power. Rehoboam, that Jeanene just mentioned to our children, is taking the throne. This is a time of transition. It's a time also towards the end of Solomon's reign. So Rehoboam is Solomon's child. During the end of Solomon's reign there is the beginning of divisions amongst the people of God, mostly around the heaviness of the burden that the king has placed on the people. So Rehoboam steps up into that space, and that's the context for which we'll hear the scripture today. But this is really for us going to be a sermon about leadership, okay? It's going to be about the ways in which God calls us and God equips us to lead God's people. And so for you, this sermon might resonate because you have a bunch of direct reports at your office, okay? You might have a number of people who call you boss. It might resonate with you in a different way. It might resonate because you're a really a leader amongst your friend group. When it's time to plan an event, everybody kind of looks to you. It might be that you are a leader in your classroom, okay? Maybe you're the representative to the student council. Maybe you are a Lead Teacher amongst your teaching group, or maybe even you serve on a committee here as a chair or a faithful committee member. Each of us, I believe, is called to leadership in different ways, so the sermon is going to kind of hit us in different ways this morning. We're going to learn some things that we think are helpful and perhaps not so helpful for leadership. I'll tell you, um, I'm all about trying to learn how to be a leader, better and better each day. Instagram algorithm has me figured out I mean it's like Simon Sinek, who—hopefully you all know who that is. He wrote a book called Find Your Why, okay? He's a leadership expert. If I scroll down, it's Brene Brown talking about kind of more group leadership. Keep going, it's Mel Robbins. I mean it's everybody trying to teach us how to lead; and I'm trying to take in as much as I possibly can there, because Simon Sinek says this about leaders. He says, "Leaders are always learning. Leaders are always learning." So that's what we'll do today together as we read from First Kings, the 12th chapter. We're going to begin in the first verse and go through the 17th verse. Before we do, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, move once again amongst us. Move amongst us and quiet us that we might...we might hear your word for us this day. Give us ears to listen for the thing you are teaching us, and then help us to respond. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer.
Amen.

1 Kings 12:1-17

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. When Jeroboam, son of Nebat, heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, 'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you.' He said to them, 'Go away for three days, then come again to me.' So the people went away.

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Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the older men who had attended his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, ‘How do you advise me to answer this people?’ They answered him, ‘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.’ But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. He said to them, ‘What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, “Lighten the yoke that your father put on us”?’ The young men who had grown up with him said to him, ‘Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, “Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us”; thus you should say to them, “My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”’

So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, ‘Come to me again on the third day.’ The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, ‘My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’ So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill the Lord’s word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king,

‘What share do we have in David?
We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.
To your tents, O Israel!
Look now to your own house, O David.’

So Israel went away to their tents. But Rehoboam reigned over the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, in the midst of this transition from one leader to the next, in the midst of division amongst the community that would be ruled over by this king, the people come to this place, Shechem, and they have in this place what...what we might call, if we're American history buffs, a Continental Congress of sorts. They draw together—all together—and they start talking through what this new season of leadership is going to look like. What are its characteristics going to be, and Rehoboam is there. He is there to listen and hear. Just as the people say to him, “Your father made our yoke heavy. What we need you to do is lighten the yoke. If you do that we will serve you faithfully, well, forever.” Many leaders who are new to leadership, they, um, they hear things, and they need time to process them. I know I've been doing this for a while too; and sometimes when someone comes and gives me advice, I have to kind of sit with it for a while. I actually think Rehoboam shows some wisdom here. “Give me, give me three days.” If you lead a team, and your team comes to you, and they all tell you one thing in uniform voice, and you're not sure if you agree with it, you need to take some time and step back. And he does that here; and Scripture tells us that...that he goes and he meets with the elders, the men who are Elders, okay? Later with the the younger men. Maybe it's not so much age that we need to pay particular attention to, although there is

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great wisdom in age. Hear that, Older Wilders! Okay? But maybe we might be able to have a lens of understanding these voices as mature voices and immature voices in our lives. Maybe you know some people that you count among mature voices that speak into your life, and then you know some others you count among the immature voices. He goes first to the elders, and he says, "What do I do? They've said I need to lighten the yoke. I'm not quite sure that's the best move I can make right here at the beginning of my tenure. It's not going to set me up for later on down the line." And here's what I love, the older men, they know immediately. The mature voices know immediately what he needs to do—lighten the yoke. They said that's what they needed. "You lighten the yoke, you lighten the yoke, you're going to show number one you're listening to them and number two you're going to engender goodwill amongst the people. Lighten the yoke." It's almost like they've been rehearsing it, how quickly they respond to the question of Rehoboam, and that's where I think it's interesting. Where scripture says that these are the same men who attended to King Solomon, it's almost like they had the same message for the previous King, and he didn't listen to them. It's almost like Solomon would come to them and say, "What do you think I need to do?" And they had already said to him, "You're making it too difficult on the people; lightened their yoke." But he had ignored them, and that had led to division, and, unfortunately, like father like son, Rehoboam decides he doesn't just want their counsel. He wants to check out what his buddies say. "Now listen, guys, I know you've never held court with the king before. This is new to me too. I know none of us actually know how to do this leadership thing, but I want you to tell me, if you were in my position, what would you do? All right, what are our options? It's very simple here. We've got a heavier yoke or a lighter yoke. and what'd your father do? Heavy yoke. We liked your father. You got to show them you're strong. Let's go heavier yoke." "Okay, guys, that's what I was thinking too." There's this thing about leadership, confirmation bias, right? We have in our head what we want to do. Maybe we were taught it by our parents. We were taught it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do, actually, so we really...we want that to be affirmed. The last thing we actually want to do, maybe even for Rehoboam, the last thing we want to admit to is that our...our parents or people that we respect, they actually chose the wrong path. And so it's easier for Rehoboam to say, "Yeah, let's go with that." 3 days pass. They come back. That wasn't lost on y'all, right? Three days pass. Three days pass. The people come back. Rehoboam lets them know, "Here's the deal. I heard what you said. I do not care. My father—you thought things were bad under my father; you thought you were laboring under my father. It's about to get even worse." And what's interesting here is that the Israelites...they aren't, they don't outwardly express that they are...they are angry or even that they're sad. They don't take up arms in this moment against their ruler. They just say, "All right, y'all, this isn't for us. Let's go home. Let's go back to our tents, and let's look to the provision of our community. It's quite obvious this leader is not going to listen to us, so now we have to fend for ourselves." They say very clearly in scripture, "What share do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, oh Israel. Look now to your own house, oh David." They don't just feel angry or sad. They feel separated from the community because of the way they are being treated by their leader. And they went away to their tents. It seems to me that maybe the first lesson for us is that it is critical what voices we choose to listen to in our lives. When we are in places of leadership or of influence, and each of us has our different spheres of that, what are the voices that are speaking truth, however hard it might be to us and life into us as leaders. Rehoboam chooses poorly. You can choose well. Perhaps, when I talk about a mature voice, someone...some image pops into your head. Maybe, maybe it is a parent, actually, or maybe it's a peer, or maybe it's a previous supervisor of yours, or maybe it's someone one that you have used and gotten to know as a mentor of sorts, right? Maybe that's what pops into your head. Whoever it is, I want you today to appreciate their voice in your life even more; and also when I say to you who are the immature voices speaking into your life, maybe some images come up for you as well. Maybe they're closer to you, and you listen to them more than you really should.

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In about an hour a new pastor will be ordained and installed in a little town in Georgia, in a church that I loved for a decade before coming here. It's been a wonderful gift for me to get to counsel with this new pastor. She graduated from seminary back in May. We've known each other for a couple months now. When she took the call to this new church for her, she called me, and we started talking about what transition might look like. When I took the call middle... middle to end of October a couple of years ago, I called Ann Apple, called a couple of the folks that I rely on most often. We talked a lot about transition, so she and I have been talking a lot. One of the things that we've talked about is all the ideas that she has for the church. We get done with seminary, and we are convinced we have all the right things for the church, right? When I got done, I was like I know what the church needs and doggone it, we're going to make it happen, right? Don't talk to me about yokes. I'm good. She and I, we've been going back and forth about what the first couple years of transition will be in her leadership in that place and with all these ideas that she has—and they're beautiful and they are good and they are faithful, and what I love about her is she's seeking wisdom, seeking advice from outside, people who have maybe a little bit of experience doing it, right? One of the things that I shared with her is something that I think is critical for leadership. I told her of this new congregation that she is about to get to shepherd for a season. They will let you challenge them in equal measure to the way that you love them. They will let you challenge them in equal measure to the way that you love them. What Rehoboam gets wrong about leadership is that he thinks it is about power, but leadership is actually always about love. It is about how much one is willing to care for those over which they have charge or amongst which they have charge; but leaders—they don't always want to hear that. It is much easier, it is much easier to pawn off responsibility and labor onto the people than it is to do it yourself. It is much easier to put a heavier yoke on others and to relieve yourself of that burning. Serving people is hard to do because, darn it, we're all so people-y, right? It's difficult work if you're going to truly be a leader. And so we need to listen to voices who encourage us to be kind and gracious and generous in our leadership of God's people.

We also...we also need another type of counsel. Did you notice anyone or any energy that was conspicuously absent from this text? We had the elderly voices, the mature voices. We had the younger voices, the immature voices, but there's one significant character, I don't know, who authored the whole story. Rehoboam takes three days, 3 days! How long do you think the conversation with the elderly gentleman lasted? 20 minutes? How about his buddies? About the same? But the sun rises and sets three times, and who does he not consult with? The Lord. Conspicuously absent from this text. As people of faith we need to be seeking out mature voices in our lives, and we also need to take the pause to pray over the ways in which we are to lead people. Maybe in our family, maybe in a classroom, maybe at work, maybe even in a church. Here's the thing. Not only is Rehoboam neglectful of a prayerful life, not only is that in and of itself a problem, but what we notice here too is that the character of God doesn't get revealed in his leadership. A couple of thousand years later Jesus will say to the people, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. My yoke is easy. My burden is light." God is in the business of light, lightening yokes. God is in the business of relieving the heavy burden that is placed on us and that we place on others. That is the business of the good news of the Gospel. If Rehoboam would have listened to the mature voices, perhaps he would have made a better decision. If he would have counseled with God, perhaps he would have been corrected before he went and made this terrible decision that would ultimately divide the people even further. Here's the thing—some of you are going to wake up tomorrow morning, and you're going to go to an office or you're going to sign in a virtual work space, and you are going to be a leader in that place. Others of you will go back to your office, your doctor's office, and there'll be nurses and practitioners that you care for, others of you will have charge over a council of this

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church. Maybe you help us Vision, maybe you help us nurture the faith of our children. Here's the lesson for us this day—that the work of leadership that is faithful to Jesus Christ is always willing to listen, willing to learn. The voice of God is always speaking to us as we are trying to lead God's people, and God can and will be at work in your leadership. What's critically important for us to know is that there is a possibility in the midst of God, pregnant with possibility, to bind people together by the way that you lead and care for them, to not push them back to their tents, but to draw them closer in. It will be a way that will force you to set aside your ego and your pride. It will be a way that will ask more of you than the voices that you often go to for advice will tell you. It's going to ask more of you than that, and it will be a way that will help to birth Grace and inclusion and love in this world. I'm not sure the way in which you'll be called to lead this week or next month, but what I know and what I hope for us is that you will learn from this lesson in First Kings, and that you will be reminded that the God of all creation has placed you in a leadership role to lighten the yoke.

Let us pray together.

Gracious and loving God, you are our great leader, the one who sets out the path before us; and we are your people. What we pray for, Lord, is that we might reflect your graciousness and your kindness in the ways that we lead in this week, whether it be in offices or classrooms or around the dinner table. We pray that you will help us to be kind, to listen to the needs of God's people as they speak to us, to help that to reshape our hearts to be more in your image, to help us to remember always that leadership is not about power, but about love.

For we ask it in the Name of Christ Jesus.

Amen.