

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 26, 2023

Friends, one of the reasons I was so excited when we first started talking about doing the Narrative Lectionary together was for an opportunity just like today, where we could continue to hear stories from our Hebrew and New Testament scriptures, hear them in context together, and perhaps hear stories that we've never ever heard preached in the Revised Common Lectionary; and that's kind of what's happening today. I have never preached nor heard a sermon on 2 Kings 22, so I'm delighted that we get to spend some time in it today; but before we jump right in, there's a little bit of background that I'd like to share with you, just a little bit about the composition of the Hebrew scriptures. As we know all of our scriptures, both our Hebrew scriptures and our New Testament scriptures started as oral traditions—stories that people told about their experience with God. And eventually those oral traditions are handed down to the point that they become written stories, and all written stories need editors. They need people to put the story in order, to make it make narrative flow. So just like our four Gospels— you know when we study the Gospel of Mark, we know that there wasn't a single individual named Mark, who created or experienced all of those stories, but rather someone who experienced them and brought together stories, oral traditions, and other written stories that they had heard in order to provide a narrative perspective of Jesus's life. In the very same way that happens with our Hebrew scriptures. There are at least four editors in the Hebrew scripture, four distinct perspectives and frameworks; and I promise I would love to teach a long and involved class about that very thing, but I promise you that this short sermon is not the time to do so. But I want you to keep that in the back of your head as we hear our text today, because our text tells the story of the discovery of one of those very important voices.

So, friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer.

Let us pray.

Gracious and faithful God, your words speak to us across generations, they move our hearts, and they move our minds so that we might journey faithfully with you. Today in this moment, silence within us any voice but your own, that hearing you we may continue to follow and deepen our relationship with one another and with you. Amen.

Our scripture text this morning comes, as I shared with you, from the 22nd and 23rd chapters of 2 Kings. I invite us to hear these words from our Hebrew ancestors.

22 Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. 2 He did what was right in the sight of the LORD and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah son of Meshullam, the secretary, into the house of the LORD, saying, "Go up to the high priest Hilkiah and have him add up the entire sum of the silver that has been brought into the house of the LORD, that the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD repairing the house, that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 26, 2023

it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But no accounting shall be asked from them for the silver that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.” The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.” When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king and reported to the king, “Your servants have melted down the silver that was found in the house and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the LORD.” Shaphan the secretary also informed the king, “The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.” Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

23– Then King Josiah directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping God’s commandments, God’s decrees, and God’s statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, and to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

So our text today is the story of a faithful and righteous king that discovers the book of the law, quite literally, the Torah, in Hebrew. Some helpful background for how we get to this point in the story of the Israelite people– As Jeanene shared with the children, they have spent some time wandering from God. The kingdoms and the might of David and Solomon are no more. The people that began as small nomadic groups with Abraham then became 12 tribes, then became two nations—a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom, and then became a single nation until their split. In fact, David preached about that split into the north kingdom and the southern kingdom just about a month ago, when we read about Jeroboam and Rehoboam; and at this point when we hear the story of King Josiah, the northern kingdom has already been destroyed by Syria, by Assyria, pardon me. That's important for you to know because for the Israelite people their political situation has changed. They are operating from a position of weakness in their political area. Now they were at times, in and out of this 200-year period, a vassal state, meaning that a stronger kingdom had come in and taken control and forced a new ruler on the throne, that had built altars for the other kingdom's gods and required that the people of Israel, particularly the leaders, offer sacrifices to them. We hear all about this when the prophets talk about it throughout our Hebrew scriptures—the dangers of worshiping other gods and building other places of worship; but we also know historically it was a political reality, even the Roman Empire did this. As the empire spread it absorbed all of the gods of the nations that it conquered, and it made them part of the Roman pantheon, extending the Roman pantheon of gods all the way to its borders and bringing new gods in in order to create a unified community. Now this was also a very dangerous time to be a king of Israel. Josiah's father, Amon, was crowned at age

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 26, 2023

22, and by 24 he had been assassinated. That's how Josiah became king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah at eight years old. Now our scripture today didn't tell us when, explicitly when, Josiah took the throne. I'm assuming that they didn't allow an 8-year-old to start making decisions for an entire kingdom, but scripture does tell us that the reforms that we read about today happened in the 18th year of Josiah's rule.

So what does the text tell us about this King Josiah? It demonstrates that Josiah was faithful and honest in the way that he spoke to those who worked with and for him, in the way he dealt with the temple authorities and those who were rebuilding the temple, and even in relationship with God. When the Book of the Law, which scholars believe strongly is the book of Deuteronomy that we know it now in our modern editions of the Torah, when that was 'discovered'-- I use air quotes because most likely the book of Deuteronomy, as we know it, was composed and edited during the reign of King Josiah. But this scroll of a law and a covenant is discovered, and Josiah reads it and immediately tears his clothes, which is a dramatic but also very clear symbol of his grief and his pain at the words contained there. Immediately the text tells us that he gathers the leaders and the authorities, all the people, all that is left of either kingdom, all people great and small, and rededicates the people and the kingdom to a covenant with God. They commit to serving God, following God's statutes and decrees with all of their hearts and all of their souls--a command that comes directly out of the book of Deuteronomy. Now for the rest of Josiah's reign, he spends his time rededicating the people and the kingdom to this covenant. He destroys other places of worship, altars to other gods. He draws the people back to the God of their ancestors, the God of Isaac and Jacob; and for this, our scriptures explicitly frame King Josiah as the perfection of the Mosaic ideal. If Deuteronomy is indeed framed as the last words and teachings that Moses shared with the people, the text goes to very far lengths to demonstrate how King Josiah does it all perfectly. He was the very best king Israel could have. Our scriptures describe him as unqualifiedly good. There was "none like him" and "none arose like him" after him. That phrase "none arose like him" is only applied to two people in our Hebrew scriptures--Moses and Josiah. Not King David, not King Solomon, but King Josiah. Josiah is depicted as the only king that fulfilled the shema that God gives the people in Deuteronomy 6, leading the people to practice and live the lives that God is one and that they should love the Lord their God with all that they have.

He's the only king that follows the explicit steps that are laid out throughout the book of Deuteronomy, that if there's a question about what to do, you go to the priests, and then you go to the prophets; and when they return to you with their words, you do not stray to the left nor the right from what they command you. Turning not to the right or to the left. And our text today and the other texts containing stories of Josiah go to great lengths to say that he neither "turns to the right nor to the left." Now one can argue all day long, and perhaps in this mythical class that I'm going to teach about the creation of the Hebrew scriptures, we can argue about whether these things are true or whether they are written through a lens of someone who has seen what Josiah did and then described what a perfect king could be; or...or someone wanted Josiah to be a perfect king and so fudged a little bit on how he handled things in order to make him meet this ideal of what Israel needs, matching the oral history with the written scrolls. Now either way it's

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 26, 2023

not even subtext. Josiah was the best of the best, but that best of the best didn't last long. Josiah dies in battle at age 40, and two chapters later in the book of Kings, the kingdom of Judah exists no more. A selection of the 22nd chapter that we didn't read in worship today has the prophetess Halda warning King Josiah about this. When he finds the scroll, he calls her to prophesy to him, and she tells him that because he was righteous, because he was the best of us all, he would not have to live to see the destruction of all his good work—the destruction of the kingdom of Judah by Babylon. We hold this intention, friends, because back in 1 Samuel, God told the people of Israel that they didn't really want a king. They come to God and say, “Please, we want to be like the other nations. Give us a king.” And multiple times God says, “I promise you, that's not really what you want,” but they persisted, and so God gave them a king. And all the things that God said about kings proved to be true. Every...nearly every single king failed the people of Israel, even the very best of them, the most righteous and faithful king of Israel—Josiah—could not change the people of God for long. They returned to their moving away. Because we are human, we are prone to wander as *Come Thou Fount* tells us.

You're probably wondering what any of this has to do with us right now, and that's a fair point; but as we stand here on this last Sunday of our liturgical year, it provides us with the opportunity to reflect on just how prone to wander we continue to be. Today, if you look at the front of your bulletin, it's a liturgical holiday called Reign of Christ Sunday. In other congregations and in other denominations, it can also be called Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the liturgical year before the beginning of Advent. Now, many writers, theologians, and thinkers really despise this Kingdom language, particularly liberation, feminist, and womanist theologians. They argue, quite faithfully, that kingdom language, language of vassals and masters, is a stumbling block for those who have suffered under oppressive regimes and structures for generations. Those who have been subjugated can never see God in the language of empire. While I do not disagree, for they are often much more studious and, frankly, smarter than I am, I think it is a problem for us to abandon that kingdom language entirely for two reasons—one because the lived reality of the people of the time of the writing of these stories, the telling of these stories, was that of kingdoms. It's how they understood the world and understood themselves. We don't change Jesus's Parables about lost sheep or the wheat and the tares just because you and I don't exist and participate in the same kind of agrarian world, an agrarian society, in the same way that the people of first century Palestine did. More importantly for me, I think that when we abandon that kingdom language, it reflexively allows us to dodge a vital narrative thrust of the entire scripture—that God's ways are not our ways. Our scriptures bear witness to a God whose kingship is nothing like empire, is nothing like worldly kingship. Scripture tells us about a God that consistently moves through the ones the world says are powerless, through the outsider, through those who have been shoved at the margins, from Rahab to Ruth, from God calling up prophets like Samuel and Jeremiah when they were literal children in their beds, to the Son of God breaking bread and sharing table with lepers and thieves. In fact, I think that this vision of God's reign as reflected in our scriptures is just so foreign to us that we return here year after year. We tell these stories year after year, again and again, because we don't quite grasp it. God doesn't make sense to us. What God is and what God is calling us to be flies in the face of the understanding of the world. It is overturning ideas of

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 26, 2023

power and weakness. God demonstrates a kingship, a leadership, that is not lost in the trappings of control and authority, a leader that is not seduced by the insidious voice of power and privilege that we humans all too easily fall victim to, a God that leads not with power and might but with grace and care, concerned with the outcast and the foreigner and the least and the lost. This God that we see, this God that we worship, is a ruler that weeps for the pain of the world, a God that empties himself to take on human form, to walk with us, to rejoice with us, to despair with us, so that we are not carrying an insurmountable burden on our own. We need these images of kingship, of reign, of leadership, because we will not get there on our own. Left to our own devices we will wander. But the power and the truth and the peace and the grace of our scriptures and of our experience of God is that we never have to do it on our own. God has never expected us to do it alone. The importance of our story's focus on covenant, the reason that Josiah rent his clothes and gathered the people and rededicated them, is the focus on covenant. Covenant always takes to. God's covenant is not just a claim on our lives. It is a claim upon God as well. How many times do our scriptures attest to the Lord saying, "I will be your God and you will be my people?" God has called God's people to return again and again, maintaining covenant with us, a covenant that requires more of God than it will ever require of you and me. God journeys with us, never expecting us to get it right on our own. God is prepared and continues to call us home again and again and again. Curiously enough, friends, the next time our scriptures mention King Josiah is in the genealogy of Jesus, in the first chapter of Matthew, a genealogy that is not quite focused on bloodline as much as it is on a covenant connection with God's people. Next week is indeed the first Sunday of Advent, and as we begin that journey, the journey toward the manger, and then continued toward the empty tomb, we stand here to remember why that Christ child was born— to show us that there is a different way to be people in the world, that we can choose to be God's people. It's my hope and prayer for us today that just like those gathered people of Israel, the faithful followers of King Josiah, we can take this time to rededicate ourselves to the covenant that God has offered us, a covenant that requires us to return again and again, but a covenant that promises us a place of forgiveness and grace and peace.

Amen.