

Good Words

It was a grand and glorious thing, for a moment, an all-too-brief moment. David won the trust of the northern tribes, danced the ark into Jerusalem, and unified the kingdom. Yes, there was scandal and the occasional trickery, but this was ancient Israel's high, holy moment. Solomon, David's son and successor built the Temple, a house for the Ark. God never really asked for the Temple; God never really needed a brick-and-mortar place to call home. Instead, God indulged David's dream and gave permission for David's son Solomon to build the Temple. God was always more concerned with building a people, a lineage of leaders who would keep God's word, a people who would worship God more than anything of their own making or doing. And as David's kingdom wanes and Solomon's then begins, the cracks we suspected were there become more obvious. We remember Solomon as wise, but scripture tells us that he was also ruthless, "conscript[ing] forced labor out of all Israel" to build his masterpiece.¹ As the elaborate Temple walls are being erected, God reminds Solomon where God's concern still lies:

Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you that I made to your father David. I will dwell among the Israelites and will not forsake my people Israel.²

Again, God makes it clear. God is not all that worried about the color of the carpet or the height of the staircase. God desires faithfulness; God longs for promises kept.

Things do not go well during Solomon's reign, at least by God's standards. Yes, the Temple is built, and Solomon amasses tremendous wealth and power, but Solomon also fails to keep faith as God had asked:

¹ 1 Kings 5:13, New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

² 1 Kings 6:12-13, NRSVue

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David...So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done.³

And the text goes on to tell us that there are consequences:

Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, 'Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son.'⁴

Solomon's son is Rehoboam. A prophet declares that God will in fact give a good portion of the kingdom to Jeroboam, the son of one of Solomon's advisers. Solomon seeks to have him killed, so Jeroboam flees to Egypt. Then Solomon dies, and Rehoboam is on the throne. [Read 1 Kings 12, selected verses]

It can be difficult to hear any good news in this text. Rehoboam, the heir to David's throne seems determined to rule with scorn and cruelty alongside his obnoxious toxic friends. Jeroboam isn't much better. They both ground their ruling, their leading in fear and force of power. And if that is not enough, Jeroboam—the one who looks for a moment like he might be ok even if he doesn't have David's blood running through his veins—builds a shrine to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem. And his design includes not just one golden calf but two. If anyone has been paying attention, that's just about the worst thing faithful children of ancient Israel can do. As you probably remember, when Jeroboam's ancestors were wandering in the desert, they stopped for a bit while Moses went up a mountain to chat with God. While he was there, receiving the Ten Commandments, the people got antsy, and Aaron, Moses' brother and second-in-command created a golden calf and declared that the calf is their God, the one who brought them out of Egypt. Nope. Big nope. God grew irate and vowed to destroy the people and start over. Moses intervened and convinced God to spare the people. But the expectation is crystal clear: the God who created us, the God who brought our ancestors out

³ 1 Kings 11:4, 6, NRSVue

⁴ 1 Kings 11: 11-12, NRSVue

of Egypt and delivered us to the Promised Land asks us to worship him, and only him. It's at the top of the list, and honestly it doesn't really sound like a lot to ask after all God has done and promises to do. And God expects the leaders, the kings to lead the way. It is safe to assume that both Rehoboam and Jeroboam know the story. Maybe neither is a bible whiz, but this one incident is a crucial one in the tradition. And yet, Jeroboam lets his ambition and his fear of losing his grip on power get the best of him. He doesn't even try to be creative about it. He decides that it is too risky to allow the people to continue to travel to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the Temple, so he decides to create a shadow shrine of sorts, an alternative to keep the people closer to home and less likely to shift allegiances back to Rehoboam in the south. He practically re-enacts the full scene from Exodus. No. Big no. One might rightly wonder if the children of God have learned anything at this point.

It would be easy to shake our heads and wag our fingers, to write off those silly kings with their funny names, but it is a crisis that has happened over and over again, not only in the larger world but in the church, a crisis where human fear and love of power subverts love of neighbor and faithfulness to the Lord of all. Today we mark our annual celebration of Reformation Sunday, the commemoration of Martin Luther's pushing back against the leaders of the 16th century church who were exploiting the people to pay for the construction of St. Peter's in Rome. Specifically, they were selling forgiveness, God's forgiveness, perhaps the greatest and freest gift of all. But the leaders had lost sight of the people, and of their role in sharing the good news in word and deed. Like Rehoboam and Jeroboam they had begun to see only as far as their fear and their greed; they had lost sight of the big picture, the longer and larger story.

If there is any voice of hope, any faithful voice in this dismal story, it comes from the voice of the elders Rehoboam consults early on. They do seem to remember the longer and larger story, even if all they have known is Solomon's reign:

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.⁵

Speaking good words and serving the people, they tell Rehoboam, are the marks of a good king. And those words are not simply nice words or eloquent speeches. The language of *good words* echoes the language of covenant, the promises made between God and the people, the promises David's heir is called to uphold. These wise ones know that the grasping of power and the crushing of people is not the way to build a strong and lasting kingdom. In fact, it is a sure and certain way to undermine and destroy what little kingdom is left. We will not hear from those advisers again. Their voice fades from the narrative, but their good words remain, hauntingly hovering in the background as David's kingdom, the golden pinnacle of ancient Israel's history crumbles under the weight of human arrogance and greed and short-sighted fear. Because God was never looking to build up one particular king; God longed—still longs, I believe—to build a people, a people that spans more than one generation, more than one moment.

This story extends to the present day, of course. And it is one that speaks rather pointedly not to them out there, but to us, to the church, to the very human ones who make up the Body of Christ. Some of us gathered in Davis Hall earlier in the week to hear the stories of some of forerunners in the faith, pastors from the Southern Presbyterian church who had to decide whose voices they would heed and whose wisdom they would follow in the middle of the last century. At one point Carolyn Crowder, the interviewer and creator of the film asked different individuals if they could name a moment when they realized something was wrong in regard to race. Two different men told stories that related to baseball. One described being at a game in Winston-Salem. When a Black player took the field much of the crowd erupted with jeers, slurs, and threats. The man's father remained silent. He turned to his son and told him in no uncertain terms that he was never to treat anyone like that. The other pastor, John Kuykendall recalled sitting on the floor of his grandfather's study where he was reading the sports section while his grandfather, a pastor worked on a sermon. John

⁵ 1 Kings 12:7, NRSVue

recalls that he commented out loud that Jackie Robinson must be a really good ball player, and his grandfather replied, “He can’t be, because he’s Black.” These two men reflected out loud on how to respond to these words from their elders, discerning not whether their elders were good or not, but whether their words were good or not. And from an early age, these two men knew that they would face difficult choices to stand on the right and good side of history.

Not every elder’s words are wise or good. Not every young buck is looking out only for themselves. No one individual, no one community is always in the right. All have sinned and will sin and fall short of God’s glory. **ALL**. It is our calling, our vocation to help one another listen for God’s leading and to discern—always with an abundance of humility—where good, holy, righteous wisdom is found and what God would have us do. Our story—God willing—is only one part of a larger and longer one. When future generations look back, what will they say about our words?

Years ago, I came across a poem often attributed to the Roman Catholic Archbishop Óscar Romero who was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating mass in El Salvador. The poem is entitled, “Prophets of a Future Not Our Own”:

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything

and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something,

and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders,

ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.⁶

The story of Rehoboam and Jeroboam will likely not go down as a favorite for many; it does not make the cut when children's story bibles are compiled, and yet it is a crucial piece of our understanding of the dividing of the kingdom and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. It is a crucial moment in the longer, larger story, our longer, larger story. It serves as a cautionary tale of greed and grasping, and yet it speaks a good word to us, too, *if* we are willing to listen to the voices of those long-forgotten advisers. Their good word is one that never falls out of favor, one that lifts us beyond our temptation to throw up our hands and look the other way. This good word echoes *the* living Word of God, the Word who claims us as his own, the Word who calls to us across the ages and call us to follow in his humble, servant ways. This Word invites us to plant seeds and lay foundations, to stand up and speak out, to offer our own good word to the world in his name and for his sake.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/romero-prayer>