

## A Nation Divided – October 27

Last week's reading was a celebratory story. David was anointed King. He led Israel to victory and united the twelve tribes of Israel into one nation. He established Jerusalem as the government and religious center of Israel. And he and the people danced and celebrated when the Ark...the symbol of God's presence...was returned to Jerusalem.

But unlike Ruth's story from the week before, this isn't a happily ever after story.

During David's reign, Israel prospered economically. It did even more so during the reign of his son, King Solomon. But the internal corruption within David's family and within David himself left a mark on the monarchy that could never be erased. That mark eventually led to the downfall of Israel.

The first black mark against David involved Bathsheba. David abused his power to take Bathsheba away from her husband Uriah and then had Uriah killed. The first baby conceived by Bathsheba died.

One of David's sons raped his half-sister, Tamar. David did nothing. So his son Absalom killed his brother.

David's sons mostly ended up dead in the rivalries over who would inherit the throne. David's choice was Solomon, Bathsheba's son. Nowhere near the first-born, he wasn't really the legal choice.

David's reign was marked also by endless wars. David wanted to build God's temple, but God told him he had shed too much blood to be the one to build the Temple.

But God had made a covenant with David and God was faithful to that covenant. And the covenant was passed on to his son Solomon.

During Solomon's reign, he consolidated power by marrying wives who were the daughters of foreign rulers. Scripture says he had hundreds of wives. He built a magnificent Temple for the worship of God. He built great cities and an economy that was booming.

But all that Solomon built was built with forced, harsh labor. In a sense, their own king led Israel back to slavery.

For all his faults, David remained faithful to God. Solomon did not. God's covenant with David said that his son would also reign over a united kingdom, so the kingdom stayed together during his time on the throne. But that ended with the next generation.

Rehoboam was Solomon's son. Under him, things got worse.

The people resented Solomon for the harsh conditions and forced labor he imposed.

Rehoboam had a shot at making things better. He had good counsel in the older men who told him, ease up. Be a servant to your people. not a slave driver.

But Rehoboam didn't like that advice. He wanted to be a tough guy. So he listened to the younger men's advice instead.

Starting from a place where he feels compelled to let people know he was more of a man than his father because of the size of his genitals, Rehoboam promised the people he would be even harsher than his father.

Disgusted, Jeroboam decides to set up a new government outside of Jerusalem. He too has a shot at making things better. But he is fearful he will lose his power to Rehoboam if the people have to keep going to Jerusalem to worship. So he draws them away with new gods – golden calves. He draws them away with false promises of something better.

The kingdom divides into two parts. Israel is ruled by David's grandson Rehoboam. Judah, in the south, is ruled by Jeroboam – Solomon's old advisor.

The whole thing is a dumpster fire. And from here it keeps going downhill. Next week is All Saint's Sunday so we'll break from the Narrative Lectionary. When we resume, we'll begin a several week look at the prophets.

During the time of the prophets, Israel and Judah's corruption had weakened them to the point where they were vulnerable to attack by more powerful nations. They were defeated and many of the people from Judah were sent into exile. The northern kingdom of Israel essentially ceased to exist.

See God's people were to live in a particular way. With God and God's covenant at their center, they were to be a model to the rest of the world for life lived with God as ruler. Under God's rule, they would live a life of peace and justice, especially for the weakest members of their community. Their leaders were to be servant leaders who would uphold that kind of life for the well-being of the whole community.

But those leaders failed. They fell into the same trap of greed and power-mongering and idolatry that is such a temptation for all leaders and rulers. They lost their center.

So, as always, how do we hear something for us in this story?

And are there any ties we can make to Reformation?

It's kind of a funny thing. Today's story is about a nation divided. We also seem to be living in a nation divided. The Church is divided, more or less along the same lines as the political divisions.

We mostly view division as a negative thing. And surely when division leads to a divisiveness that makes actual mission...or government... impossible, it's not good.

But the Reformation divided. And the church has kept dividing ever since. Sometimes the church divides over things that seem inconsequential. Sometimes a congregation divides because part of the congregation doesn't like the pastor.

I've seen more congregations divide because the worship time was changed than just about anything. Most always though there are deeper...and very unhealthy... divisions if you look.

But sometimes the divisions in the church have happened because they needed to. At its heart, reformation means getting rid of beliefs and practices that are wrong...that are not consistent with the gospel.

Martin Luther led the Protestant Reformation as a reaction to the greed, corruption and power plays of the Roman Catholic church of the time. All that greed and power-mongering and sometimes even downright evil were done in the name of God.

In a word, sometimes division is necessary because human sin makes an institution a tool of the wrong side...an institution that has lost its center.

The problem is, sin keeps getting back in. Way back in ancient Israel, Jeroboam was right to break off. Rehoboam was all about using his power against his people and wasn't really fit to rule.

But then Jeroboam ultimately didn't do much better. He got worried about keeping his power and drew the people away with false promises.

Both of them lost their center. They lost their commitment to God – they did not hold up their end of the covenant God made with them.

So what is our center? It's the new covenant. It's the new covenant written in Jesus' blood. "Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin."

Our center is not the law. It's a person...it's Jesus. Our center is us joined to Christ in death and resurrection.

But frankly, knowing that won't always help divisions within the church. The most common divisions now aren't even within or between churches. They're people who separate themselves from the church altogether. They're people who recognize the church often doesn't look much like the guy they say they follow.

They're people who long for the Spirit of God but don't seem to find that spirit in many churches.

I think all that points, not to the end of the church, but to its ongoing reformation.

Too often when churches say we need to get back to our center, they're talking about law. They uphold a Christianity whose perceived moral superiority excludes people they're not comfortable with...forgetting that Jesus hung out with the people that made the Pharisees uncomfortable.

The church all too often lifts up leaders who are charismatic and powerful. They join themselves to political power and forget that those we are called by Jesus to love and serve are the sick, the poor, the immigrant, the outsider and the prisoner. Leaders in the church are called to servant leadership... empowered by the Holy spirit and not by human power.

I think the church is being pushed to get back to its real center...the crucified and risen Christ...the one whose self-giving love is a model for us...the one whose Spirit dwells within us and within the church...the Spirit that is so active and alive in the world that she sometimes takes our breath away.

A church that can help connect people to that center is a church God can use to love, heal and serve the world.