

“Division”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29
October 27, 2019 - Reformation Sunday

Y’all, I promise I’m not making this stuff up. The story we are about to read comes from the Bible, the very Bible sitting in front of you. We’re going to hear about two kings: Rehoboam and Jeroboam — or “Ray” and “Jerry,” as I like to call them.

Last Sunday, we had David uniting the Israelite tribes in the North with the tribe of Judah in the South. By the end of our reading, that unity will be destroyed, with ten northern tribes rejecting King Rehoboam, leaving the kingdom divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The North gets more tribes. But the South gets Jerusalem! These are the two kingdoms that will eventually fall — first the North to the Assyrians and then the South to the Babylonians — leaving the people in exile.

So how did we get here?

David’s son Solomon was known for his wisdom, but he seriously goofed things up for the kingdom in terms of faithfulness to God. You could argue that the first false god that Solomon loved was himself, living a life of opulence without regard for God’s covenant or God’s people. He married foreign brides by the hundreds and while he built the temple, he also built temples to foreign gods. In order to maintain power, Solomon turned the kingdom into a system of oppression with forced labor. The king of the liberated Hebrews who were brought out from under the boot of Pharaoh was now the boot-wearer.

Enter Jeroboam. *Hello, Jerry.* Jeroboam worked for Solomon until he was told by a prophet that he would one day be king because of Solomon’s unfaithfulness. Knowing the king would not be amused, Jerry fled to Egypt.

So now Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, is being coronated. Jeroboam comes back to join the people of the North in asking for Rehoboam to take a step away from his father’s tyranny and move toward faithfulness if he is to be their new king. Spoiler: it’s not going to go well for anyone. Listen for the Word of God in this reading from 1 Kings:

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.” Rehoboam said to them, “Go away for three days, then come again to me.” So the people went away.

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 with 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 the third day, as the king had said, “Come to me again 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 the king might fulfill God'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.

Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Penuel. Then Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.” So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. This act was sinful. The people went to worship before the one calf at Bethel and before the other one as far as Dan.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Did you catch all that?

Jeroboam doesn't lead a coup, instead starting with a seemingly reasonable request in exchange for loyalty. The people have suffered. Help them, and you've got it made, Ray.

Rehoboam doesn't listen to his experienced elders who tell him to “speak good words” and “be a servant.”

They're telling Rehoboam to be the kind of king Israel longs for and deserves: one who will shepherd the people and honor their covenant with God.

Rehoboam doesn't think these old fogies can handle the genius of their great king, so he turns to his "yes men" and they give him what he wants to hear. Thanks be to God that in the nearly three thousand years since King Rehoboam, men vying for leadership have stopped talking about the size of their "hands." Rehoboam doubles-down on oppression, and so the people decide they've had enough.

In Hebrew, the line of Rehoboam and his cronies about adding to the burden kind of rhymes and sounds like a dopey political slogan. In response, the tribes that defect offer what sounds more like poetry. Somehow, the division happens without bloodshed.

And if the story ended here, we'd have the tale of a villainous king who split the kingdom. But power and its seductive grip don't know north from south. Jeroboam leads the Northern Kingdom and builds up these ancient cities that have meaning going back to the book of Genesis. You might remember Peniel as the place where Jacob wrestled with God. The struggle continues, as Jeroboam realizes that he may have won the day, but Rehoboam still has Jerusalem, and the pull of the worship of the Almighty might sway these fickle Israelites.

This idea of making golden calves and telling the people to worship them is clearly cribbed from Aaron at Mount Sinai. Jeroboam quotes Aaron almost exactly: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Jeroboam had to have known that this was a bad idea, but he does it anyway, and you can draw a straight line from this worship of idols to the fall of the North a few generations later.

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning to hear the Good News?

Connecting this story to world leaders is like shooting golden calves in a barrel. It's too easy to point to the President ignoring the counsel of experts and generals and scientists and human rights groups and lawyers and people of faith and previous presidents from both parties in favor of "yes men" and conspiracy theorists. It's too easy to see this same President doubling-down on cruelty at the border and in other policies, building wealth on the backs of those with less power. It's too easy to see a nation divided. It's too easy to see potential responses to this President that could go in wildly unfaithful directions emerging from blind obedience and grabs for power.

Of course, "too easy" doesn't mean the connections aren't there. It's just that I'm interested in digging a bit deeper here.

It's Reformation Sunday, and we celebrate that. It's Reformation Sunday, and we mourn the division. In another building project, the Church of the late 15th and early 16th Centuries passed the cost onto those with less power, extracting money from the faithful and doing theological contortions to justify it. Reformers seeking faithfulness, not division, cried out. The Church split. And if the story ended here, we Protestants would have cause to be pretty pleased with ourselves.

But the division led to violence. And within the Reformation, power led to violence and corruption, from the 16th Century right up to today. There is blood on the hands of the Catholic Church. There is blood on the hands of the many churches that look to the Reformation as their birth. Today we mourn this division, even as we recognize that unity does not equal righteousness, knowing that issues of justice as well as theology can cause healthy schism. In some ways we at Edgewood have more in common with Our Lady of Sorrows up the street than we do with some Presbyterian congregations that are part of another denomination. And in other ways, we have more in common with our Jewish neighbors than with our Catholic ones. There can be a holiness to disunity, even as we grieve the barriers between the people of God.

When I think about Jerry and Ray, these two misguided kings, it's comfortable to talk about Trump and Giuliani, or long-dead Popes and John Calvin or John Knox.

If I stretch toward vulnerability, I wonder where instead of seeking true wisdom, I have looked for confirmation of what I already think from my friends, my church, and my news sources. I wonder when I have tried to feed my own ego at the expense of others. I wonder if I worry too much about trying to outdo my dad. I wonder whom I have missed in trying to keep this congregation going and to expand our influence. I wonder if there have been times when I have been as calculating as Jeroboam, trying to distract people in my life from faithfulness to God as I ask them to pay attention to me instead. I wonder what idols I place in convenient places so that a more arduous trip to Jerusalem can be avoided.

Neither of these kings stayed true to their God. Servanthood was an option for them. An invitation to a different kind of relationship between leader and people was made to them. From these kinds of kings come the desire of Israel to have a new anointed king, one who will fulfill God's covenant and remain steadfast in love and peace.

Here we gather to worship our God, to give thanks for God's faithfulness, even as we find ourselves divided in a world steeped in injustice and idols.

Here we gather to worship our God, yearning to be re-formed again and again in the image of Christ, the servant who wielded such a different power, who stood squarely and unwaveringly on the side of the oppressed, who took on the yoke of the empire and gave up his own life, who shows us again and again - in life and resurrection — that the way to truth and life and peace comes at tables, not through the halls of castles or cathedrals.

Thanks be to God for a call to be servants, to be faithful, to be healers of division and creators of justice. Amen.