

GOD’S STORY, OUR STORY

A HOUSE DIVIDED

I Kings 12:1-17; 25-29

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 27, 2019

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On this fourth Sunday in October, that we Lutherans celebrate as Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther’s posting of his 95 Theses, setting in motion the Protestant Reformation, the Narrative Lectionary has assigned the text of I Kings, Chapter 12, verses 1-17 and 25-29. These verses account the event that led the Northern Tribes, under Jeroboam, to secede from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, now ruled by Solomon’s son and successor, Rehoboam. For such an occasion as Reformation Sunday, this text seems out of place. Or is it?

Being a person who likes to interpret both history and dreams, I came across a historical dream that Frederick the Elder had on the night before Luther affixed his infamous challenge to indulgences to the door of Wittenberg’s Castle Church on October 31, 1517. The elector of Saxony, which included Wittenberg, told the dream to his brother, Duke John, who was staying with him at his palace in Schweinitz, approximately three miles from where Luther resided and taught Scripture and Theology.

The dream was recorded and widely circulated. It began with Frederick telling Duke John:

“Brother, I must tell you a dream which I had last night, and the meaning of which I should like much to know. It was so deeply impressed on my mind, that I will never forget it, were I to live a thousand years.”

As a dream interpreter, I like to concentrate on the visible inanimate objects. Let

us listen on:

“. . . [I] dreamed that Almighty God sent me a monk, who was a true son of the Apostle Paul. All the saints accompanied him by order of God, in order to bear testimony before me . . . They asked me to have the goodness graciously to permit him to write something on the door of the Castle of Wittenberg. This I granted . . . whereupon the monk went to the church and began to write in such large characters that I could read the writing at Schweinitz. The pen was so large that its end reached as far as Rome, where it caused the triple crown upon the head of the Pope to shake.”

Frederick then conversed with the monk, and asked him where he got this pen. The monk replied that **“it belonged to an old goose of Bohemia, a hundred years old.”** This is a reference to Jan Hus, whose surname means ‘goose’ in Bohemian. Hus was burned at the stake for translating the Bible into his native language, and placing authority in the Word of God alone. Frederick went on to say to his brother: **“Suddenly I heard a loud noise — a large number of pens had sprung out of the long pen of the monk.”** The elector concluded the conversation with his brother: **“I have, indeed, thought of an interpretation, but I keep it to myself. Time, perhaps, will show if I had been a good diviner.”**

Let us now go back further in time to the period we heard about in one of the Old Testament’s historical writings — the first of the two books of Kings. David, Solomon, Elijah: the story of I Kings is populated with great heroes of ancient Israel. These were men of courage and charisma, along with many frailties and a constant need for grace. This story also has a full share of villains: Adorinijah, Shimei, Jeroboam, Rehoboam, and, of course, Ahab and his queen, Jezebel. Most of all, however, I Kings is the story of Israel’s God, who never fails to love His people, or to keep them under His Kingly care, even when they choose to follow the pathways of folly and idolatry.

Standing in line at a Cracker Barrel Restaurant on our recent vacation ‘down South,’ I was drawn to a large checker board and checkers. I remembered my grandfather, and how he taught me to play checkers. He was certainly not the kind of grandfather who indulged grandchildren, as in letting me win at least one game I played with him. Let the record be told, I never even won one game of checkers with my grandfather, who died in my fourteenth year. Everyone who plays checkers knows there is a thrilling moment when one of the ordinary playing pieces suddenly become royalty. Having moved and jumped all the way to the far side of the board, a checker becomes a king. “King me!” commands the player whose piece has reached the opposite back row. To be “kinged” requires the stacking of a second checker on top of the first. From that moment on, the new king has the power to move all over the board!

Many people want the game of checkers to become a way of life. Not content to be ordinary, they want to be the royal center of attention. “King me!” they say, wanting the power and money to get control and to buy anything they want. “King me!” is what a guy says when he gratifies a sexual desire, instead of making a commitment to love a woman for life. “King me!” is what happens when our own needs are satisfied and cared for at the expense of others. The problem with kingdom-building is that we never find our rightful place in the Kingdom of God. This is the central issue in the two books of Kings, which document the shared and separate histories of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and their mostly unfaithful and selfish rulers.

Power, oppression, rivalry — these interrelated themes are universal across time. The first book of Kings opens with the death of Israel’s beloved King David, and the anointing of his second son by Bathsheba, Solomon, as king. The Bible describes Solomon as a man after David’s own heart. **“Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father”** (3:3). Even though Solomon wished for wisdom over power and riches, Solomon tragically turned away from God in his later years. God would indeed take Solomon’s kingdom away. Yet,

His justice was tempered with the mercy of steadfast love. ***“Yet for the sake of David your father, I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son”*** (11:12).

God’s promise comes to pass during the reign of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam. The people are prepared to serve Rehoboam as their king. Royal projects and policies have placed a heavy burden upon the citizens to supply crops, animals, and materials in the form of taxes. Both King David and his son, King Solomon, implemented systems of forced labor. The choice that Rehoboam faced was simple: to go easy or go hard, to stay the course, maintaining the status quo, or to give the people change they could believe in. The new king was not entirely sure what he should do, so he asked for a little more time to think about it.

To help him make his decision, Rehoboam summoned two sets of advisors. The advice they gave him was so completely contradictory that it should have clarified his choice. It also clarifies for us Christians today the basic choice we all have to make in our relationship with God, our families, and our church community, whether to serve or be served.

First, King Rehoboam took counsel with the elders. He asked them the obvious question, ***“How do you advise me to answer this people?”*** (12:6). Here is the advice they gave to Rehoboam. ***“If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them and speak good words to them, when you answer them, they will be your servants forever”*** (12:7). This was sound advice based on the Biblical principle of servant leadership. In ancient Israel, the king was the shepherd of the people. He was their leader and defender. He was called by God to protect them from danger and provide for their needs. Unfortunately, this was not the approach that Rehoboam wanted to take, or the advice he decided to follow.

Not wanting to serve, but to be served, he ***“abandoned the counsel that the elders gave him, and instead took counsel with the young men who had grown***

up with him and stood before him” (12:8). These young men were Rehoboam’s contemporaries, his cronies and friends. He identified with them. Listen to the pronoun he uses to address them. *“What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?’”* (12:9). His friends gave Rehoboam this advice. *“My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. And 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”* (12:10-11). In calling for harder working conditions and heavier taxes, this response sounded almost like that which Pharaoh gave to Moses the first time he asked that the people be free. Once the people heard what Rehoboam had to say to them, their minds were made up. *“To your tents, O Israel!”* It was a way of saying, “Everyone for himself.” The Northern Tribes under Jeroboam seceded from their union with the Southern Kingdom over the issue of slavery.

From now on, Israel in the north and Judah in the south would be a house divided. How history seems to repeat itself! When criticized as being Satan for casting out demons, Jesus responded, *“And if a house is divided against itself, that house won’t be able to stand”* (Matthew 3:25). On June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln gave his famous “House Divided” speech in his race for the Senate. Quoting Jesus, Lincoln explained: **“I believe the government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”** Jesus, Martin Luther, and Abraham Lincoln knew instinctively they were to be servants, and were not to confuse or detract from the people’s loyalty to God. As we learn from the Bible, from history, and even from the events of today, *“A house divided cannot stand.”*

Let us pray. Almighty God, your servant Rehoboam divided Your kingdom with his tyranny, yet, You remained faithful to both kingdoms, even in the midst of conflict. Show us Your presence in conflict, and help us to resolve our differences, uniting this world in Your name.

AMEN