

RETURN TO ME

II Kings 22:11-20, 23:1-3

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

November 24, 2019

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We live our lives according to yearly cycles. There is the school year, the seasonal year, the astronomical year, the fiscal year, the calendar year, and, for us Christians, the Church liturgical year. The school year varies for students from elementary to high school, and those in colleges and universities. The fiscal year runs from July 1st through June 30th the following year. We all know the calendar year, but how many of us are aware of the church year?

Today is the last Sunday of the Church year. In a liturgical church, such as ours, the Church year begins with the First Sunday of Advent, and concludes with Christ the King Sunday.

On this Sunday, we close out the Church year, as well as the Fall Narrative Lectionary readings, with young King Josiah embarking on a reform campaign to rid the Southern Kingdom of Judah of its idol worship and to restore the temple in Jerusalem to its proper place and primary purpose as the religious center of Judaism. Here's the back story.

Josiah became king when he was eight years old through an act of violence. His father, Amon, after just two years on the throne, was murdered by a cabal of conspirators in a bloody palace coup. The assassins were immediately apprehended and killed. Josiah was rescued and promptly crowned king, the youngest king ever to sit on Judah's throne. The year was about 640 B.C. Josiah's reign would end thirty-one years later, when he would be killed in a battle with the Egyptians at Megiddo in 609 B.C.

Violence launched his kingship, and violence also ended it. But the thirty-one

years of his reign were simply stunning, in no small part because of the discovery of the Deuteronomy Scroll. The boy-king, Josiah, inherited a huge moral and political mess. His grandfather, King Manasseh, may have been the absolutely worst king Judah had ever experienced, filling the country with every imaginable evil, and even some unimaginable ones, during his fifty-five year reign.

Assyria was the dominant world power at the time. It had bullied and abused the Near Eastern world for three hundred years, and had acquired the distinction of making high art out of evil — cruelty, torture, witches, black magic, sorcerers, child sacrifice — you name it. King Manasseh was a great admirer of all things Assyrian, and imported its evil by the truckload into Judah and Jerusalem. He constructed Assyria-inspired sex-and-religion shrines all over the country, erected obscene phallic pillars to the sex goddess, Asherah, filled Solomon's temple with foul images and relics, and even built rooms in the temple for the use of prostitutes — a moral cesspool, a spiritual nightmare, creation polluted, salvation repudiated, a holy righteous environment in ruins. Such were the conditions faced by the eight-year-old Josiah when he was placed upon Judah's throne.

We don't know who rescued Josiah from the assassins and then guided him through his childhood until he reach manhood and maturity, able to govern in his own right. We are not told that story. All that we know is the results. At age sixteen, he was seeking ***“the God of his ancestor David.”*** By the time he was twenty, he began cleaning up Manasseh's mess, scrubbing the country clean of impure idols. He embraced David as his mentor and model in all matters royal. He ***“walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left”*** (II Chron. 34:2).

When Josiah was twenty-six years old, Hilkiyah, the high priest, in the course of extensive repairs being carried out in Solomon's temple, found a scroll, the ***“book of the law given through Moses”*** (34:4). We know this book as Deuteronomy. It had long been obscured in rubble during Manasseh's misrule. The discovery raises several questions. Was Hilkiyah's discovery a result of the renovations? Was it hidden to keep it from being destroyed by the evil king, Manasseh? Or did

he inadvertently find it, forgotten, and take Shaphan's visit as an opportunity to disclose its existence?

When King Josiah heard the words of the scroll as his secretary, Shaphan, read them to him, he tore his clothes in an act of repentance. Josiah's rending of his clothing was a sign of his commitment to change. Or rather, he changed by the Word of God, to be formed and re-formed by attending to the Word. As one reads the account of the reforms of Josiah in II Kings, Chapter 23, one is struck by the fact that they are centered on reforming the worship life of the people, of centering them in the first commandment: to worship the Lord ONLY, and to have no other gods. When one realizes that Josiah's grandfather and others were engaging in idolatrous worship practices, such as child sacrifice, one can understand Josiah's strenuous efforts. In Josiah's time, the reformation that took place was that the Word was let out of its prison, and it proceeded to set the people free from their bondage to false gods.

The major prophet, Jeremiah, received his call to be a prophet four years after Josiah launched his reform movement. He began preaching repentance, using language that had many affinities with the words and phrases in the Deuteronomy Scroll. The young king and the prophet were roughly of the same age and mind. Deuteronomy was the text and theme of reform. After Josiah was killed in the Battle of Megiddo, Jeremiah preached Josiah's sermon (II Chronicles 35:25). What Josiah did was good, as far as it went, but it was not enough to save his nation. Egypt and Babylon teamed up to overthrow the despised Assyrians. However, Babylon would finally conquer Judah, destroy the Jerusalem temple, and haul off the aristocratic class into exile. Sometimes we are tempted to think that we are also called to save our culture. But what if society is too far gone? Josiah's example teaches us to do our best, even in the worst of times.

When one bites into the story of Josiah's Reformation, there is a certain delicious, yet bitterly ironic, taste to the whole thing. On the one hand, this is a story about how the people of God didn't know their story, because the story remained hidden, locked up behind temple doors. The Word was not read to the

people. It was not taught to people. The priests did not preach it. As a result, the people did not know their story.

On the other hand, ironically, almost none of the people of God today know this story, because the story remains excluded from our scriptural readings during the Church year. I don't think I have ever read or heard a sermon preached on this text. It really wasn't until I first started teaching the Bethel Bible Series as year after coming to Grace, that I came across Josiah's reformation. In my almost 34 years as your pastor, I have tried faithfully to be both a Biblical preacher and teacher. It was not until recently, when we employed the single text Narrative Lectionary, that I was able to preach on texts that don't appear in the Common Lectionary. My hope was to be able to preach and teach texts from both testaments, so that you would become better acquainted with, and versed in God's entire story, as told from Genesis to Revelation.

Josiah's Reformation was neither the first or the last reformation that God's people experienced. In the 1500's, another reformation occurred. That was the Protestant Reformation. The problem in that era was slightly different. Whereas in Josiah's time, the Word lay locked in Solomon's Temple, in the time of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others, the Word lay hidden behind prison bars of language and clericalism. The Bible was not available in the common language of the people. It was only available in Latin. Because of this, it was only available to and through the clergy. When Jerome first translated the Bible into Latin, his entire purpose was that the Scriptures could be available to all believers so that they would read it. **“Ignorance of the Scriptures,”** he wrote, **“is ignorance of Christ.”**

Why all the fuss and alarm about the Bible? Because the man, whether he goes by the title Pharaoh, King, Caesar, Emperor, knows that the Bible is dangerous. It starts revolutions and offers an alternative kingdom that does not take the status quo as either adequate or inevitable. It presents us with a God who created us, loves us, and wants something better for us.

Beloved people of God, what is our situation in 2019, 502 years after Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation? Now the Scriptures are not gathering dust in some hidden chamber of the Temple, but rather they are closed and gathering dust right out in the open, on our coffee tables, bedside night stands, or bookshelves. The modern cult of the expert has placed Bibles in people's hands, and, at the same time, robbed them of the confidence that they are competent to read and understand them. But our time also has this much in common with Luther's and Josiah's. The Scripture is still powerful, dangerously powerful. And when the Word gets out, and the Holy Spirit gets hold of the Word and the people who read it, powerful things can happen. Walls come tumbling down. Stones are rolled away, and heavens are torn asunder. The powerful can be cast down from their thrones, people can be fed, and wineskins can burst. Sinners can die to themselves and have Christ reborn in them. And churches, even old, dusty, mainline churches, can have new life breathed into them.

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