

Discerning Hearts
Combining Scripture and Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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Today's sermon and scripture are interwoven.

I don't know about you, but the names Jeroboam and Rehoboam are not very familiar to me. And that's after twenty years as a rev, and 49 years running around Christian churches. If I can say one thing about the Narrative Lectionary we've been exploring this fall, it's that it's drawn me in to texts I've never studied deeply. Today I think it would be better to study these verses together - their context, what came before and after, what questions they might leave us with - than for me to offer an elegant three point sermon.

Now for context, you need to know what came before. We're in the history section of the Hebrew Bible. Here's the story before now.

Creation. The Patriarchs. Joseph brings his family to Egypt to survive famine. Pharaoh treats the Hebrews terribly and they escape in the Exodus. Moses leads them to the promised land - though let's remember the land already had other residents - remember the story of Ruth we told a few weeks ago.

Samuel was a judge - the earliest kind of leader of the Israelites - when the people came to him and said, we want a king. Our neighbors have kings, we should have a king. Samuel (1 Samuel 8) says nope, not a great idea. The people complain. Samuel talks to God. God says, nope, not a great idea. First, I'm your sovereign, not a human. Second, Kings are power hungry, they'll conscript your sons, take your money, focus on their own power, and be generally terrible. (We, in 2023, know nothing about power-hungry leaders. This is all ancient history.) The people say, but all our neighbors have kings. God says, *FINE*. King Saul. Starts out good, messes up. King David. Starts out good - unites the twelve tribes into one nation - messes up. King Solomon. Starts out good?? He did build the first temple in Jerusalem, which was a pretty big deal. We remember him as wise - but was he? By the end of his reign, as one commentator puts it, "Solomon became like Pharaoh, using his people, especially non-Judahites, to support his huge household and to establish cities, forts, and trade with other peoples. Judah was favored and Israel was afflicted."¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/kingdom-divided-2/commentary-on-1-kings-121-17-25-29-3>

So Solomon dies, and now his son Rehoboam is supposed to be king.

This is 930 before the common era.

Our reading begins...

1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. ²When 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. ³And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, ⁴'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.' ⁵He said to them, 'Go away for three days, then come again to me.' So the people went away.

Okay. So here's something good. Rehoboam is taking a pause. He's going to discern what to do. He's listened to Jeroboam who's speaking for the northern ten tribes. He's going to consult with some folks. Give me three days to think, he says.

Let me just say before I keep reading: discernment is good! When we need to make a decision about something that is ours to do, discernment is good. Our tradition has lots to say about discernment.

Romans 12 - Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

John Wesley had a concept that I try to teach our confirmands: the Wesleyan quadrilateral. If you have a decision to make, consider scripture, tradition, reason and experience - all together - in reaching your decision.

In small group this week we heard that there is likewise a Vedic tradition of discernment.

Anyway, prayerful discernment is good. I wonder what Rehoboam did?

*6 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?'
7They 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 for ever.'*

Okay. Rehoboam consulted wise elders - also good! And they told him to be a servant leader - which, I think they meant, serve the people not your own power.

8But Rehoboam disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. 9He 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"?' 10The 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. 11Now, 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."' '

Okay. This is a problem. These are young guys, with no view of history, and perhaps no frontal cortex to speak of, and PS, who are using vulgar language. The Hebrew includes some euphemisms I won't try to explain - but one, at the end, I will. Whips are not harsh enough for these guys, they want to use those whips with sharp metal ends - scorpion whips. This, as one commentator I read put it, is toxic masculinity in 930BCE. (We in 2023 know nothing about toxic masculinity, it's ancient history to us of course.) So whose advice did Rehoboam follow?

12 So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, 'Come to me again on the third day.' 13The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him 14and 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.' 15So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfil his word, which the LORD had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

Rehoboam responds to the outcry of the people, the beatings will continue until morale improves. What, then, will the people do?

16 When all Israel (that is, the northern tribes) 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. ¹⁷But Rehoboam reigned over the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah.

Israel, here, refers to the northern ten tribes. Israel went away to their tents. They were not going to stay under an oppressive ruler, even if he was from the root of Jesse.

So the tribes - united only for under a hundred years - divide. For the rest of the Hebrew Bible, they will not be one united people.

But, at this point, Jeroboam is looking like a hero. A liberator, really. But the story isn't over - now we'll find out why Hebrew Bible history has no love for Jeroboam either.

25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Penuel. ²⁶Then Jeroboam said to himself, 'Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. ²⁷If 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.' ²⁸So 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.' ²⁹He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

And that's where the reading ends....

Okay - golden calves. Bad plan. Why did Jeroboam create false idols? To keep the people of the northern tribes from wanting to keep going to the temple at Jerusalem. How do you compete with Jerusalem? We know nothing about that in 2023, of course - the draw of Jerusalem.

And we know nothing in 2023 about false idols made of metal, this is all ancient history.

So just to sum up: Rehoboam tried to oppress the people in order to hold on to power. And the kingdom divided.

And Jeroboam desecrated the worship of God, in order to hold on to his power. He winds up out of favor in Hebrew Bible history forever more.

Here's what it comes down to: Jeroboam and Rehoboam clung to power over doing what was good for the people. When God told Samuel what kings would be like - it all came true.

Neither Jeroboam nor Rehoboam asked God what to do.

Neither of them put the welfare of all the people above their own power.

Neither of them tried to be servant leaders (as the elders advised Rehoboam).

But the good news is, God continued to be present both to Judah and Israel - and God is present to us. Right there, for us when we approach with discerning hearts, seeking God's wise counsel.



OLD TESTAMENT

