

I

Yesterday, our British sisters and brothers did something they haven't done in over seventy years as they marked the coronation of King Charles III.

Whatever your thoughts are on the monarchy, the installation of a new leader, be in the coronation of a king or the inauguration of a president or the swearing in of an elected official – such events are always occasions where people reflect on the past and a look together toward the future.

And I would be remiss if, on Scottish Reformation Sunday, I didn't point out that King George III derisively referred to the American Revolution as "The Presbyterian Rebellion." Nine signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians, including the Reverend John Witherspoon, who would later become associated with a minor seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.

We Presbyterians are theological descendants of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, and as such, we get anxious when too much power is concentrated in one place or person, whether it's a monarch or a pope or anyone else. As heirs of the Protestant Reformation, we recognize that sin is not just an individual human problem, but also one that affects every human organization and institution. We recognize that we humans were created

by God and declared by God to be good, but we also have a tendency toward tyranny and idolatry, and so therefore we try to spread power in our churches and monitor it with a system of checks and balances.

II

Our reading this morning is about the arrival of a new king, and our story comes to us from the book of 1 Kings, but before we get to the text, let's remind ourselves about a few things regarding the history of ancient Israel.

About 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, the people of God took a look around and they noticed that all their neighbors had something that they themselves did not have. Namely, a king. Up until that time, the Israelites had lived together as twelve tribes, and whenever a dispute arose within or between tribes, they appointed judges to rule, but there was no king who ruled over all Israel.

And so the people of God decided that if they were going to be viewed by their neighbors as a legitimate nation, they better get themselves a king. And so they went to a prophet of God named Samuel, and they said, in Ryan's revised translation of the Hebrew text, "Hey Samuel, go tell God that we want a king."¹

And so Samuel took the people's request before God, and God said, again, in Ryan's revised translation, "Samuel, please tell my people that they don't

¹ 1 Samuel 8

want to mess with a king, and they don't need one. All I've ever wanted, from the day I brought my people out of bondage in Egypt until now, is for them to be my people and for me to be their God. Please tell them they really don't want a king."

And so Samuel reported this back to the people of God, and they listened, and they said, "No, we still want a king."

And so back to God went Samuel, and God said, "Samuel, tell them to think about this in practical terms. Tell them that a king will tax their land and conscript their sons into his army and take their daughters for his concubines. Trust me, a king is a bad idea."

And so Samuel reported to the people what God had said, and the people listened, and they looked around again at all the other nations, and they said, "Nah, we still want a king."

And so Samuel reported back to God, and God said, "Ugh. Ok, fine, but when this all goes sideways, don't say I didn't warn you."

And so God sent Samuel to anoint the first king over ancient Israel, a man by the name of Saul. Saul's successor was a king by the name of David. Under David's rule, ancient Israel reached the peak of its political and military power, and David established Jerusalem as the religious and political capital of the nation. David was succeeded by Solomon, and under Solomon's rule, Israel reach the peak of its economic power, and under Solomon, ancient

Israel constructed the Temple there in Jerusalem, believed to be the very dwelling place of God on earth. If you've ever visited or seen pictures of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, that is the foundation of what was once one of the greatest and grandest structures in antiquity.

The combined reigns of King Saul, David, and Solomon lasted about a hundred years. By the time King Solomon died, all of that militarism and all of those construction projects had created great hardships upon the people. Saul and David and Solomon each had their successes, but also terrible moral failures, and the stability of the unified kingdom was beginning to crack under the weight of it all.

And so when Solomon died and his son Rehoboam ascended the throne of Israel about 900 years before the birth of Jesus, he asked two groups of people for advice. And that brings us to our text for this morning.

So listen now for a Word from God from 1 Kings 12:3-19.

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.' He 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 for ever.' But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted 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 on the third day, as the king had said, 'Come to me again on 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 he might fulfil his 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. When King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam then hurriedly mounted his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

It's hard to be a leader, especially a new leader. It's important to seek and find good advice. And Rehoboam started out on the right track. Rehoboam had received good advice from some wise elders. Do what you can to alleviate suffering and lift burdens off of the people. Speak good words to them. Show the people whom God has placed under your leadership that you care about them and their wellbeing.

But alas, Rehoboam instead listened to poor advice from his peers who were full of hot air. What's the point of having power over the people if not to lord it over them, they seemed to say. You should tell them that if they don't quit bellyaching about their burdens, you'll really give them something to cry about. Tell them that when you're finished with them, they'll think your father Solomon was a softie compared to you.

And so Rehoboam spoke harsh words to the people and did not listen to them.

And that moment was the beginning of the end of the unified kingdom of Israel, for Jeroboam voiced what so many others were feeling. What share do we have in David? To your tents, O Israel. Look now to your own house! Jeroboam and others like him saw that there was no place and no voice for them in the government, and so they left.

And from that moment forward, ancient Israel was torn asunder, with ten of the twelve tribes going north and calling themselves Israel, and the two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, retreating to Jerusalem in the south and calling themselves Judah.

All of the fracturing and moral failure after moral failure after moral failure eventually led to the destruction of both kingdoms, just as God had warned Samuel it would so very long ago.

III

But let's talk about you. You, my friend, are a leader. Maybe you lead a classroom, or a courtroom, or a district. Maybe you lead a family or a team or a business. Maybe your leadership position is quite as obvious, but if you think about it, you lead someone – maybe a younger sibling or a friend.

There are all kinds of books and podcasts and Ted Talks about leadership out there. But I want to you think with me for a moment about leadership from the perspective of stewardship.

Stewardship is one of those church words that makes folks grab for their wallets and purses, because we've accidentally trained the people of God that stewardship is just a more polite way to talk about money.

But stewardship is about far more than mere dollars and cents. Psalm 24:1 says the earth is the Lord's, and all that is therein, the world and those who live in it. As people of faith, we make a theological claim that everything, and I mean everything, and everyone, and I mean everyone, belongs to God.

Rehoboam's problem was that he forgot that very simple lesson. He thought that the Israelite people belonged to him, and therefore he was free to speak to them and treat them however he pleased. He forgot that they weren't his people, they were God's people, and God had entrusted them to his leadership only for a season of time.

And so think with me for a minute, my friend, about the people that God has entrusted to your leadership. Think with me about your classroom, or your colleagues, or your courtroom, or your district. Think with me about your family, your friends, your team, your tribe. Picture their faces in your minds eye. Can you see them?

They're not yours. They're God's. They belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to you, not even to themselves, but to God. God has entrusted them to your care, to your leadership, but only for a season of time.

One of the best pieces of advice I received from a pastor mentor of mine was to remember that we're all temporary. Every single one of us is temporary. We're just here for a season, and none of us are irreplaceable.

So for heaven's sake, speak good words to the people under your care. Do what you can to alleviate suffering and to lift burdens for people. Not because it makes good political sense. But because that's the model of kingship that Jesus sets for all of us.

One way to look at the person and work of Jesus is to look at him as God's answer to the people's demand for a king. In Jesus, God says, "Here's what a good king looks like. Here's what a good king does."

The night he knew that he would be betrayed and arrested, the Lord Jesus got up from the supper table, took off his

outer garment, picked up a towel and a wash basin, and began to wash the feet of his disciples. And it shocked them. It scandalized them. Peter was indignant. But Jesus washed them anyway, including the feet of the very one who would betray him.²

The next day, as he hung on the cross, soldiers placed on his head a crown, but a crown of thorns. Pontius Pilate, standing in for the most powerful empire the world had yet known, ordered that an inscription be written above his cross in three languages, so that everybody could read it, and the inscription said, "The King of the Jews." With a word, Jesus could have called down 10,000 angels from heaven and destroyed those who opposed him, but as he breathed his last, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."³

We who call ourselves Christians, we who follow Jesus believe the testimony of the gospels, namely that three days after he died, Jesus was raised again from the dead, and he spent the next 40 days with his followers before he ascended into heaven. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the long-promised, long-awaited king, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny are somehow tied together.

And we believe that he is coming again, and soon. And when he comes, there will be a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from

² John 13

³ Luke 23:34

all tribes and people and languages, and they will stand before his throne, and they will cry out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

We believe that before the throne of God, they will worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.⁴

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

⁴ Revelation 7