

November 26th: Renew

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Let’s pray for wisdom before we begin.

Breath of God, descend on us this morning, we pray. In your peaceful presence, renew our minds and our hearts. As we gather, wipe away old fears, cleanse us of stale mindsets, reset us from unhelpful habits. As we come together as your people, prepare us for a new season, equip us for a fresh start, ignite our souls with passion for ministry and reconciliation. Reform us, day by day, and week by week, so that we are obedient to you and your Kingdom. Lead us towards a

better, more hopeful, more gracious, more merciful, more generous, more loving future. Amen.

Over the past two weeks, we took a brief detour into the writings of our Old Testament prophets by hearing first from the minor prophet Hosea, and then from the major prophet Isaiah, but today we return to the world of the so-called “historical books.” In this section of 2 Kings, we have an interesting string of monarchs in the Kingdom of Judah, which was the southern of the two kingdoms that resulted from the split in the 9th century BCE.

Our larger story begins with King Hezekiah, who was faithful to God and diligent in his leadership, but he was succeeded by his son Manasseh, who proved to be wicked and corrupt. Manasseh reigned for fifty five years, the longest of any of our biblical kings, and was in turn succeeded by his similarly evil son Amon, but Amon is assassinated after only two years on the throne. This assassination prompts Amon’s son Josiah to become the next king of Judah, and Josiah is the ruler who we are reading about today and the one who leads Judah in a new direction.

With Josiah’s rise to power, he had many complicated dynamics to address and many challenges to face. The first challenge is that he assumes the throne at a very young age. Our passage for today begins with this: “Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother’s name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath.”

I want us to pause for a minute and think about an eight year old that you know. What are they like? Are they responsible? Are they good at making decisions? Are they good at eating their vegetables? Probably not so much, right? Or think about what you were like at this young age—what would it have been like to have so much power and responsibility concentrated in the hands of a child? How would you have felt, knowing that every move you made would have lasting consequences for an entire kingdom of people? I know that Simba sings, “I just can’t wait to be King...” but I think he’s pretty naive to the level of skill and discernment that is necessary to rule. When I was eight, my

parents barely trusted me to ride my bike to the park, I highly HIGHLY doubt they would have trusted me enough to run a whole nation!

But Josiah seems like a very rare eight year old, because our text records that he was a wise king, even in his young age. Our biblical author writes, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.” So here we have a comparison between Josiah and the famous King David—who serves as a kind of blueprint for all future sovereigns. Even though David was far from perfect, he is known to the people of this time as “a man after God’s own heart,” and so they take inspiration from his spirituality and his leadership. David was not literally Josiah’s father, but in the minds of the tribes of Judah, he operates like a spiritual successor, taking on the mantle of this revered leader and carrying on his legacy.

After a while on the throne, Josiah begins to confront some of the dysfunction that was present under his father and grandfather. And the first order of business is to renovate the temple in Jerusalem that has fallen into disrepair and disuse. During the reigns of Manassah and Amon, the nation of Judah had turned away from faith in Yahweh and had instead begun to practice the religions of their neighbors. Due to the increasing power of the Assyrian empire, some smaller kingdoms adopted the rituals and beliefs of Assyria as a way to position themselves as an ally instead of an adversary. Judah is one of these smaller kingdoms, and therefore vulnerable to attack. So Manassah and Amon had built temples to the Assyrian gods and celebrated those gods with sacrifices and festivals—leading their people to practice a form of syncretism between worship of the Israelite God and the worship of these idols. So the temple that had been built by King Solomon in Jerusalem has been converted into a shrine for these foreign deities, this holy space has been desecrated by these idolatrous rituals.

Our passage says, “In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, to the temple of the LORD. He said: “Go up to Hilkiah the high priest and have him get ready the

money that has been brought into the temple of the LORD, which the doorkeepers have collected from the people. Have them entrust it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple. And have these men pay the workers who repair the temple of the LORD—the carpenters, the builders and the masons. Also have them purchase timber and dressed stone to repair the temple. But they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are honest in their dealings.”

These verses demonstrate that Josiah has dedicated enormous resources to this campaign—including funds collected from the people of Judah. This process will include significant efforts at rebuilding, with skilled laborers of many kinds coming together to restore the temple to its original glory and original purpose.

But in this process of rebuilding and repairing King Solomon’s temple, something unexpected happens. Our story continues, “Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.” He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: “Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple.” Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

So what’s happening here is that the high priest has discovered something that had been hidden or stored away—and that something was the Book of the Law. At this point in Judah’s history, this Book of the Law probably contained a number of different texts, including sermons by Moses, instructions for festivals, wisdom teachings of certain prophets like Elijah, and the 613 laws that were codified by the Israelites during their settlement into the Promised Land. It was their scripture, their source of knowledge about God, their record of their collective history. So how did this very important book remain lost for so long?

Well, you can probably guess that previous kings had stored it away, and considered it no longer necessary or applicable now that new gods and new forms of worship, and new types of sacrifices were part of Judah's official religion. But as Josiah begins to read this recovered book, and he is once again inspired to renew Judah's commitment to Yahweh, he knows that his reforms cannot end with just the restoration of the temple.

Both 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 35 records that Josiah's plans for Judah included a full scale revitalization. The people had forgotten their true identity and their core beliefs, so Josiah launched a massive agenda for his entire kingdom. Not only is the Book of the Law restored to its proper place in Judah's worship and King Solomon's temple, Josiah also recruits the remaining priesthood to conduct a new ceremony of covenant—a public demonstration of Judah's faith and commitment to living as God's people. And then, because Josiah doesn't do anything halfway, he banishes all of the idols and idol worshippers from the land, including foreign cults, priests, and all superstitious practices. He throws them out so that his nation can start fresh.

2 Chronicles also tells us that Josiah reinstated the celebration of Passover, which had been neglected for at least a few generations. There were people in his kingdom who had never in their lives celebrated this story before, and so he goes all out. That text says, "there had not been a Passover celebrated like it since the days of Samuel." In fact, Josiah's revival of Passover was so impactful that many of the Jewish traditions that exist today surrounding this sacred holiday are rooted in his reforms and his desire to see this story kept alive for generations to come. And now, biblical scholars argue that Josiah's reforms and actions of renewal were absolutely essential to the survival and thriving of Jewish identity and community.

And so, in the spirit of wise King Josiah, our verb for today is: to renew. I want to be careful here, because I think this passage could be misunderstood. When we look at Josiah's actions and the reasons behind them, we could incorrectly assume that the correct response in our own time is to always look to the past and to hold onto practices and beliefs of our ancestors—without any

sense of discernment or wisdom about why those practices or beliefs matter or how they fit into our larger narrative. Josiah knows that traditions aren't something to blindly follow, because then it becomes just another form of idolatry. Tradition can point us to God, but it isn't the point itself.

The rediscovery of the Book of the Law, when applied to our modern times, isn't necessarily a rediscovery of ancient rules and restrictions—it's a rediscovery of God's story and God's hope for creation. It's a rediscovery of our common foundation and motivation. And so I think it's helpful to remind ourselves that Josiah doesn't reinstate worship of Yahweh or the historic covenant or the celebration of Passover because of nostalgia for a time gone by, but because all of these events and rituals reconnect Judah with God, and renew the relationship between them. Josiah also evaluated all of the things that were part of Judah's public spiritual life, and discerned that certain actions and behaviors needed to be abandoned, even though they had been practiced for decades or generations, because they were distracting God's people from their true purpose and their true identity.

As many of you know, our congregation has embarked on a journey of revitalization over the past few years, which at some points has been wonderful and life-giving, and at others, difficult and confusing. But like King Josiah, these challenges are in service of a larger goal. Like Josiah, we have an opportunity to rediscover God's story and the hope behind our faith so that it can bring life and energy to our community. In our own setting and context, we have the opportunity to rediscover what is indispensable and meaningful for our ministry as a church. Part of our work together is the work of rebuilding what is sacred and then sorting through what beliefs, or ideas, or items are hindering us from making an impact. Part of our work together involves renewing our commitment to God's vision for creation, and then renewing ourselves as disciples who are ready to transform the world.

And so this message of renewal applies to us individually too—as beloved children of God who are walking our own journeys of spirituality and devotion. It applies to our own personal lives, no matter where we might find

ourselves on the path of faith. You might be finding yourself at a major crossroads in your life, or facing challenges in a new season, and you might be wondering how you're supposed to remain connected to God while you're sorting through your personal beliefs. You might be struggling with how to discern what you need to hold onto, and what needs to be left behind, and that's okay! You might be feeling the weight of several changes in your life, even if you know that those changes are supposed to be for some greater good, and that's normal. The process of rediscovery, recommitment, revitalization is not easy work.

But Josiah's efforts show that renewal is worth it.

Josiah's movement made an impact that has lasted thousands of generations, an impact that will never be forgotten. And I believe that our actions also have lasting ramifications for our world. I believe that choices that we make today, both big and small, will change the course of our collective history. I believe that small efforts towards a divine purpose can add up to something memorable and powerful. I believe our renewal isn't just for our own good, but for the good of all of our neighbors too.

Amen.