A House Divided

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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1 Kings 12:1-15

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In the 1858 race for U.S. Senate in Illinois, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas was seeking reelection to a third term. He was opposed by a relative newcomer, Abraham Lincoln. Slavery was the principle issue in their seven debates. Douglas advocated for “popular sovereignty,” giving each territory the right to decide whether to permit slavery. Lincoln argued that slavery was morally wrong and shouldn’t be extended to any new territories. Douglas supported the recent Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court that denied citizenship to people of African descent. Lincoln argued that both the Bible and the Declaration of Independence argued for citizenship for all Americans.

Lincoln accepted the Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate with a memorable speech. He began with the words, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Although many now attribute the phrase to Lincoln, people in the 1850s recognized that it originated with Jesus. Lincoln’s friends and advisors urged him not to use it, arguing it was too radical for a mere acceptance speech. Lincoln wouldn’t hear of it. He argued that America cannot “endure permanently, half slave and half free.” Eventually, “it will become all one thing or all the other.”

Douglas took issue with Lincoln’s reference to a house divided. Lincoln’s response was classic, “Why whine and complain to me because of that speech. I’m not the author of it; God is. Go and whine to him for its revelation and utterance.”

Although Lincoln won the popular vote, Douglas was elected by the Illinois state legislature. Lincoln’s courage and convictions won him a national reputation. It paved the way for his election as America’s 16th president in 1860.

A house divided is true at so many levels. A family divided cannot stand. A Congress divided cannot stand. A church divided cannot stand. Here in our story, a country divided cannot stand.

We’re reading The Story together in our church this year. We jumped ahead to chapter 22 of The Story to coincide with Christmas. Today, we resume our reading of chapter 14 on A Kingdom Torn in Two.
Let me bring you up-to-date with the developing story line. God enters into covenant with Abraham and Sarah, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” They have a son named Isaac in their old age. Isaac fathers two sons, one of whom is named Jacob. Jacob has 12 sons and these 12 sons eventuate into 12 tribes. Eventually, these 12 tribes coalesce into a nation called Israel.

God serves as king to this fledging nation. But the Israelites want a king like all the other nations. God warns them that kings will draft their children into military service and tax them big time. When Israel persists, God concedes to their request for a king.

Sure enough, Solomon, the third king in succession, levies on them a heavy tax burden. He uses tax money to build a temple for God and a palace for himself. When Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam assumes the throne. The ten northern tribes petition him, “Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the heavy yoke he put on us and we will serve you” (1 Kings 12:4). Jeroboam, an administrator in Solomon’s court and leader of an unsuccessful rebellion, returns from exile to serve as their chief spokesman.

Rehoboam wisely asks for three days to think it over. He counsels with his father’s chief advisors, who are not partial to Solomon’s aggressive tax policies. Instead, they advise him, “If you will be a servant to the people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants” (12:7).

Rehoboam isn’t much interested in being a servant leader. He aspires to be a tyrant. He calls his high school cronies together for a second opinion. His bias is evident even in the way he asks the question, “What is your advice. How should we answer these people?” (12:9). His friends are identified as young men who have grown up with Rehoboam. They may be grown up but they still are acting like Peter Pan—you know, the boy who would not grow up. They have enjoyed a cushy life as Rehoboam’s assistants, courtesy of tax dollars, and want to keep it going. They advise their friend to raise taxes and rule with an iron fist. Show them who is boss.
Rehoboam announces his decision three days later. “My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions” (12:14).

The ten northern tribes, with Jeroboam as their leader, decide to revolt. They break away to form a new confederacy. This development represents a turning point in Israel’s united monarchy. A divided house cannot stand. These ten northern tribes, called Israel, will be now ruled by Jeroboam. The two southern tribes, called Judah, will function independently with Rehoboam as king.

Each story in the Bible has a lower story and upper story component to it. The lower portion of the story concerns itself with people living in the horizontal human plane. The upper story looks at these same developments from a vertical vantage point—from God’s point of view. Our goal in reading The Story is discovering how to connect our lower story with God’s upper story.

At the level of the lower story, Rehoboam makes two good decisions and one really bad decision. His first good decision when asked for a tax ruling is to take more time. We seldom make good decisions in the heat of the moment. How many times do we rue the day for making snap decisions?

My family has adopted a practice we call “the 24 rule.” We coined it from our daughter Emily, who is a high school field hockey coach in PA. Her policy is to not to discuss playing time with parents until 24 hours after a game. She finds that everyone is more objective 24 hours after the game. The same is true when we are confronted with a heated exchange or a blistering email. Give it 24 hours.

Rehoboam’s second good decision is consulting with his elders. Counseling with experienced, mature people is a frequent Biblical theme.

There are numerous Old Testament proverbs about seeking wise counsel. The irony is that many of them are attributed to Rehoboam’s father Solomon. Here is one: “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice” (12:15).

The one boneheaded decision Rehoboam makes is listening to bad advice. He listens only to people who agree with him. There’s danger
whenever we are insulated in our ideological echo chambers to hear only what we want to hear. Scripture counsels us to seek out people who both tell us the truth and have our best interests at heart.

Rehoboam’s elders give him wise counsel. Don’t be a tyrant king; be a servant leader. Roman Emperors in Jesus’ day operated in a top down leadership style. Effective leaders lord it over their subjects. “But I tell you,” Jesus said, “whoever wants to be first must be a servant of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Rehoboam lives exclusively in the realm of the lower story. There’s no evidence that he ever engages his lower story life with God’s upper story purposes. He doesn’t reference or pray to God. He doesn’t seek the counsel of those who walk with God. Second Chronicles offers a sad one sentence summary of his life, “He did evil for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord” (12:14).

As for the upper story, the only reference to God in our passage is the last verse, “So, the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the Lord, to fulfill the word the Lord has spoken to Jeroboam through Ahijah” (12:15). Was this division of the kingdom the result of Rehoboam’s folly or God’s will? In the realm of the lower story, we are told in so many words that Rehoboam is responsible for dividing the kingdom. Yet, in this last verse, we read that this turn of events (the division of the kingdom) is essentially God’s doing. So which is it: God’s will or Rehoboam’s folly?

So often we think of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as mutually exclusive. If God is sovereign, people can’t be free to make autonomous choices. Yet, if people are responsible moral agents, God must not be in control.

Our story makes two bold assertions: 1. God is sovereign; and, 2. People like Rehoboam are responsible for their actions. Scripture time and again places human responsibility alongside God’s sovereignty. God gives Rehoboam a choice; yet, God is also sovereign. Even Rehoboam’s folly cannot thwart God’s redemptive will.
God’s sovereignty is really good news. Even though evil seems to triumph, God is ultimately sovereign. ISIS and evil demagogues never have the last word. God doesn’t wait for ideal leaders or model nations to come along to activate his redemption plan. God will use the circumstances of our lives, whether good or bad, to accomplish His purposes. God will even use a divided people to accomplish His benevolent will.

This lesson is supremely demonstrated in the cross. In the lower story, Jesus is put to death by people responsible for their calloused disregard of Biblical justice. In the upper story, it is God’s will for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. At the cross, divine sovereignty and human responsibility come together as one.