“The Great Divide”

1 Kings 12: 1-17; 25-29

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This morning we continue with the narrative lectionary, jumping ahead a few generations. Last week we heard the story of David and how he brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Israel. By doing so, he brought God front and center, back into focus for the people. Today, we jump ahead in the story. We skip over Solomon, David’s son. He took over the throne after David and he had great wisdom. He was the one who built the temple in Jerusalem, continuing his father’s goal of keeping God at the center. But he strayed away from his faithfulness to God and he ruled the people rather harshly.

Our story for today tells about Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, who took the throne after Solomon. We learn that he was not much better than his dad. We also hear about Jeroboam who would become king of the northern Kingdom after it divides.

let us continue to listen for the Word of God.

1 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king.

2 When 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.

3 And 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."

5 He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away.

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?"

7 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 forever."

8 But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted with the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him.

9 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'?"

10 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.

11 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.' "

12 So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had said, "Come to me again the third day."

13 The king answered the people harshly.

He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him 14 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."

15 So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

16 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.

17 But Rehoboam reigned over the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah.

25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Penuel.

26 Then Jeroboam said to himself, "Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David.

27 If 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."

28 So 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."

29 He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

What defines good leadership?

How does one become a good leader?

Is it something one is born with?

Or something a person learns along the way?

If we look closely at these kings of ancient Israel, it seems a leader is defined by those they are surrounded with.

The people advising these leaders tell us a lot about how each king goes about his job.

For David, we saw a king after God’s own heart.

He was a faithful king, seeking to obey God’s will for the nation of Israel.

He prayed often and sought God’s counsel.

David’s son Solomon also sought God’s counsel, at least in the start of his reign.

Solomon often prayed before making big decisions or taking big steps.

As a result, the people fared well when the Kings sought the advice and guidance of God.

Rehoboam, on the other hand, never seems to acknowledge God’s existence.

Unlike his father, he doesn’t go to God for wisdom.

He doesn’t pray before making big decisions.

And yet, we still see God speaking to Rehoboam, just not in a direct way.

When Rehoboam took the throne and became king, the people of God begged for mercy.

They sought an end to the oppression they experienced under Solomon’s rule.

So they asked that he lighten their load.

Take away the heavy yoke placed upon them by Solomon.

Not knowing how to respond, he sends the people away for three days so he can think it over.

And ask his advisors for counsel.

First, he goes to the older men, the ones who were around during his father’s reign.

He seeks out their wisdom and asks them what to do.

They tell him to be a servant leader.

They tell him to serve the people.

Speak good words to them and treat them with compassion.

The wisdom of these older advisors is filled with mercy and grace.

But Rehoboam doesn’t like the sound of their advice.

He resists this idea of treating the people kindly.

So he turns to his peers, the ones who grew up with him and now serve as his entourage.

They tell him to strike down even harder.

Rule the people with an even heavier yoke than his father had.

According to their advice, Rehoboam ought to discipline the people with scorpions, an even worse punishment than the whips of his father.

Rehoboam opts to go with the unwise advice of cruel treatment of the people.

He listens to his peers and decides to be even meaner than his father.

Now, it might be tempting to read this story and jump to the conclusion that young people are not to be listened to.

That only elders possess wisdom worth listening to.

That isn’t necessarily the case here.

Yes, Rehoboam’s peers were young, but more importantly, they weren’t around during the reign of a good king.

They didn’t have the experience of living under a merciful king, as the elder advisors had.

This isn’t so much a matter of age, as it is experience.

The elders had experienced a merciful and good king, and so they encourage Rehoboam to do likewise.

As outsiders looking in, we can see God speaking through these older advisors.

We can see God nudging Rehoboam and telling him to act with mercy.

Telling him to be a servant leader as his grandfather was.

Here we see God speaking through those around Rehoboam.

It’s a rather passive way to do.

But the message is consistent with how God has advised previous leaders.

It is in line with the compassion and mercy God has told other kings and judges to rule with.

But Rehoboam doesn’t like the sound of it.

Perhaps inside he knows it is right to listen to the counsel of the elders.

But maybe it is easier to listen to his peers, since oppression and abuse was all he knew from his father.

His experience informs his decision.

As a result of Rehoboam’s straying from God’s desire, trouble comes to the kingdom.

The people decide to split ways.

Two of the twelve tribes stick it out in Jerusalem with this new king.

But the other ten tribes go back to Israel and refuse to be ruled by Rehoboam.

Then, Jeroboam enters the picture.

He is the son of one of Solomon’s servants.

And he was given a prophecy that he would take charge of ten of the tribes of Israel.

When the people in Israel hear that he has returned, they make him their king.

They hope that this will lead to prosperity for them.

But it doesn’t work out so well for them either.

Jeroboam fears they will continue to worship God and remember the good old days under King David.

So he builds two golden calves to distract them and draw them away from their faith.

It works and the people of God stray from God.

Their attention is diverted and they lose sight of their faith.

So the kingdom divides.

The kingdom becomes a mess.

This is a struggle we will see for the rest of the Old Testament.

A great divide become bigger and wider.

The people of God straying further from life in God.

Just think – what would have happened if Rehoboam had listened to the wisdom of those elders?

The ones who remember what it was like to live with a good and compassionate king.

How might that have changed the course of history?

Perhaps the kingdom would have remained united, and the people of God would have received a much better outcome.

Maybe they wouldn’t have struggled for centuries.

This poses a question for us today – how do we know whose advice to follow?

How do we discern who God uses to speak to us?

Which voices should we listen to and which ones should we dismiss?

We are often faced with situations like Rehoboam.

When there are two groups of people offering different advice.

We’re left to choose which advice to follow.

But how do we make that decision?

Fortunately we’ve been given a gauge against which we can measure the voices offering us advice.

In Jesus Christ, we have the ultimate example of truth and wisdom.

He is the most authentic voice, the one that genuinely represents God’s will.

He is the very definition of a servant leader.

The one who came to serve, not to be served, the one who came to give his life for all.

When we are seeking counsel, getting advice from others,

We can ask: Do they reflect Jesus Christ?

Does what they are saying stand up to what Jesus might say?

Are their words filled with integrity and grace?

Does their counsel steer toward mercy and compassion?

A few years ago, Fred Rogers, of Mister Roger’s Neighborhood, was honored at a TV Hall of Fame Ceremony.

He was recognized for his lifetime of work teaching children how to kind to their neighbors and telling them that each of them is special.

During his acceptance speech, he turned the focus on the television industry.

Telling the audience and television viewers that the famous people on TV are chosen to be servants.

That their role on TV is to help meet the deeper need of those who watch and listen.

Rogers reminded the audience that treating our neighbors at least as well as we treat ourselves is the most important thing.

And that it should inform everything that we do.

He then posed a question to the audience.

He asked “who has helped you love the good that grows within you?”

He then challenged the audience to take a moment to think about the people who have loved them and wanted the best for them.

The ones who encouraged them to become who they are.

Mr. Rogers was challenging all of the celebrities and Hollywood executives to think about the saints in their lives.

The ones who offered that counsel.

The ones through whom God spoke to them.

Because it is All Saint’s Day, I thought it would be appropriate for us to take this challenge as well.

To think about the saints who have filled our lives with encouragement and helped keep us on a good path.

The saints who raised us.

The saints who taught us.

The saints who shaped our faith.

In the style of Mr. Rogers I’m going to give you 20 seconds to think about these people.

I’ll watch the clock….

…Amen.