

The Torn Fabric

TEXT: 1 Kings 12:1-19

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 28, 2024

There are some very high-profile bad decisions in the Bible. Eating some forbidden fruit is pretty well known. So is betraying Jesus. Those get a lot of attention. But the bad decision I picked for this morning is pretty obscure.

If you follow the lectionary, you will not hear it, or any of the chapters around it, on any Sunday across the three-year cycle. And yet, here in 1 Kings 12, King Solomon's son, Rehoboam, makes one of the worst decisions made by anyone in the Bible; and it has had ripple effects that reach us even here in 2024.

The decision of Rehoboam in how he will govern the kingdom once his father has died is a pivotal moment in the arc of the biblical theme of how God wants human beings to use power. That theme began way back in Genesis 1:28 when God mentioned the word "dominion;" and, from that moment on, all through the Old Testament and right to the Cross and the earliest Christian communities, the Bible has shown us that, in God's realm, leading is only properly done through loving and equitable service.

"Dominion" in the Bible is almost immediately defined in Genesis 2:15 as "protect and serve," not "exploit and enslave." But Rehoboam didn't get the memo. For that matter, for all his wisdom, neither did Solomon. Either that, or Solomon let his world-renowned fame and wealth go to his head.

Historically, in 1 Kings 12, we're midway into the tenth century BCE, a time when there are more records from outside the Bible to help us both date and confirm events. King David, who was Rehoboam's grandfather, is the earliest biblical character we can date with any certainty. So, we're going to run through some history of how Rehoboam ended up at this critical juncture; who the opposition leader, Jeroboam, was; the impact of the decision on the history of the region then and now; and what we can learn about how God wants even kings to use the power given to human beings in Genesis 1:28.

As far as Israel's history is concerned, the start of the 10th century BCE marked the beginning of a political shift from a loose federation of twelve tribes to a monarchy. For the record, God told Israel through the prophet Samuel that having a king was a bad idea for all the abuse of power pitfalls that have accompanied kings and their autocratic counterparts ever since. You can read God's warnings about that in 1 Samuel 8. But, since God doesn't operate like an autocrat, when the people insisted that they wanted a king like all their neighbors had, God gives the warnings, but ultimately lets them have what they want and sends Samuel to anoint a man named Saul as king.

Saul had a lot of promise; but he turned out to be a petty, vengeful, mentally unstable, and morally bankrupt king—almost immediately proving God's point. Nevertheless, he's the first of Israel's kings, beginning what would come to be called the United Monarchy in Israel. God ditches Saul pretty quickly and sends Samuel out to secretly anoint a new king, a young man who once downed a giant Philistine with a slingshot and a stone. Saul is overthrown, and David becomes King, ushering in what Israel looked back to as the golden years of Israel's United Monarchy.

God really loved David, despite some glaring lapses in behavior, and promised to keep his family on the throne forever. So, while David was not related to Saul, it's David's son Solomon who follows him, now that we've got a family succession thing going on. Remember that Solomon was known for three things: Wisdom, wealth, and building projects. By 1 Kings 12, the wealth and subsequent building projects appear to have gone to his head.

First Kings 11 details that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which was, actually, fine as far as the law of Moses went. The problem was that most of those women were gifts from the leaders of other nations who worshipped other gods; and the women brought those worship practices with them.

In and of itself, even that wasn't breaking any of God's laws, but Solomon allows *himself* to get caught up in worshipping a bunch of those other gods in order to please his women and, presumably, the heads of the foreign

nations who had given them to Solomon in the first place. Psalm 42 talks about longing for God in the way a deer pants for water. Solomon was panting for other things and other gods.

Further, this is not just an individual offense. Solomon, like his father David before him, is the king. For the kings of *other* nations, the king was the ultimate authority. If the king did it; it was legal by definition. But Israel had pledged itself to a higher authority—specifically to the Law of God given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. That Law wasn't forced on them. All the people had a say and they chose it; and therefore, that law became Israel's constitution. It was the higher law that, at least in theory, was supposed to be embodied in the king and used as the basis for all the king's decisions in governing his people.

Having no other gods is literally the first of the Ten Commandments, and breaking it was the same sin that got Saul booted from his throne. By the middle of 1 Kings 11, God has told Solomon that, when his life ends, so will the United Monarchy. God will leave Solomon's son with a tiny piece of the kingdom in Jerusalem to keep the promise God made to David. But all the rest is going to Solomon's servant.

Wait, who is this servant? His name is Jeroboam, and he was the supervisor of one of Solomon's big building projects, a fortress called The Millo. Jeroboam's name literally means "one who pleads for the people;" and the people needed someone to plead for them under at least the later years of Solomon's 40-year rule. All the things God had warned them about kings had come to pass. Those big building projects? Good-paying jobs, right? Nope. Solomon conscripts labor and enslaves people to build them. Jeroboam saw this first-hand since he was specifically in charge of the forced labor from his tribe.

Taxes skyrocketed to pay for it all. Those massive projects made Solomon more famous, got him more wives, and brought more money into the coffers, but those who built them got literally nothing and those who paid high taxes got no return on their investment and no improvement to their lives. There's a notable irony in remembering that being enslaved to build massive public works for the personal enrichment of the king was the whole reason for Israel's exodus from Egypt in the first place!

As the people became increasingly discontent, Solomon's kingdom began to unravel, well before his death. Damascus revolted and gained their independence; there were significant tensions in other border cities and towns. Jeroboam turned from servant to rebel. But the Bible is clear that all this is God's rebellion, in retribution for Solomon's panting after other gods.

In the last part of 1 Kings 11, right before our passage, Jeroboam is walking along the road and is approached by one of the court prophets, a man named Ahijah. Making sure no one else is around, Ahijah tears the garment he's wearing into twelve pieces and gives ten of the pieces to Jeroboam, telling him that God is going to make him king over 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel. God will leave just the city of Jerusalem and a few surrounding towns to Solomon's son Rehoboam—a sign of God's continued promise to Solomon's father, King David.

Solomon finds out about the encounter and tries to kill Jeroboam, who flees to Egypt. But the regular rank and file in Israel don't know about God's prediction, the torn fabric, or anything beyond their own discontent with life in the kingdom. Everyone assumes Solomon's son Rehoboam will become king in his place, and they gather in the city of Shechem for the coronation once Solomon is dead.

And here, at last, comes the first fascinating choice in our passage. Jeroboam decides to come back from Egypt and join the crowd at Shechem. He could have marched back with an army to wrest the kingdom from Rehoboam, but he doesn't. Instead, he comes back with a question for the heir to the throne, asking and pleading again for the people. How is Rehoboam going to govern? What will guide his decisions? Jeroboam says in 1 Kings 12:4 "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."

That's pretty remarkable for someone God has promised will rule most of the country. Jeroboam doesn't feel a need to be king if he doesn't have to. He gives Rehoboam a chance to change direction, put the rebellion to rest, and keep the kingdom together. If Rehoboam does that, Jeroboam will keep the torn fabric to himself and not try to cash in. Rehoboam sends Jeroboam home for three days so he can think about it.

You heard what happens in Cathy's reading. During those three days, Rehoboam consults two sets of advisors—older men who were part of his father's administration and younger men who Rehoboam grew up with who were ready to be part of the new court. In another unexpected twist, the older men from Solomon's court had seen, like Jeroboam, that Solomon's harsh rule and lust for wealth and glory had hurt him and hurt the country. They advised Rehoboam in verse 7: "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." God's been trying to tell people that since Genesis.

Then Rehoboam consults his friends, who tell him to first taunt the people with an anatomical measuring contest and then to say to the people, "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." And, of course, Rehoboam—who is 41 years old here, even though he's acting like he's 13—goes with his buddies' advice and tells the people he will rule with an iron fist and make his father's harsh tactics look like child's play.

The result is as predictable as rain. Jeroboam takes his ten pieces of torn fabric, the majority who want nothing to do with Rehoboam and his cruelty, and heads north. Rehoboam sends a taskmaster after them to force them back. They stone the taskmaster to death and keep going. Rehoboam turns tail and runs back to Jerusalem. So much for his measuring contest.

The United Monarchy comes to a permanent end and a Divided Kingdom of Israel becomes the new normal. Even the name, Israel, is taken by the ten northern tribes to be the name for their new nation under King Jeroboam. Those left in Jerusalem and surrounding towns are, from this point forward in the Bible, known as the Kingdom of Judah.

From here on out, there are border skirmishes and hostilities between Israel and Judah for as long as each nation continues to exist. For the northern kingdom of Israel, that continued existence is about 300 years before neighboring Assyria takes over Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. Assyria takes thousands of Israelites into captivity but also sends their own people into the land to intermarry with those who stayed behind, diluting the remnants of Israelite identity and culture for those ten tribes.

The same assimilation happened with those taken into Assyria as captives. Trying to strip a people of their unique identity and culture is actually a genocidal tactic. The ten tribes from the north are often called the Ten Lost Tribes for that reason. They disappear as distinct peoples from then on, in the Bible and in history.

A couple hundred years later, the Babylonian empire conquered Assyria and then the Babylonians marched into Judah, laid siege to Jerusalem, the southern capital, and finally sacked the city. They took all but a few farmers and manual laborers off to captivity in Babylon, leaving a figurehead puppet king behind in Jerusalem.

Unlike with the Assyrians, however, Babylon left fewer people behind, only sent in those necessary to collect tribute, and kept most of those they took from Judah together in one area of Babylon near the River Chebar. Those exiles thus were able to maintain their identity and they were the ones who eventually returned to rebuild the city and temple in Jerusalem as described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Here's why all this matters.

This is an oversimplification, but after the return of the Babylonian exiles, those living in the territory of the old northern kingdom of Israel tried to join back with the south and offered to help in the rebuilding effort. You can read about it in the book of Ezra, chapter four. But their offer was rebuffed. To those returning from Babylon, those in the north were a foreign people. It had been almost 300 hundred years since the Assyrian conquest and assimilation.

So now, with Samaria still as their capital, those living in the north, most of whose DNA would have shown both Israelite and Assyrian ancestry, became known as the Samaritans. Tensions rose across the next couple of centuries until we finally encounter the deep ethnic and religious divide we find in Jesus' day, when Jews and Samaritans did not speak to each other and each did everything possible to avoid even crossing into the territory of the other.

That divide never, ever got fixed. Today, Samaria is still surrounded by walls and checkpoints, as it is, essentially, the area now known as the West Bank. There is still fighting going on at roughly the same border between the regions at this very moment; and it all began with a stupid, arrogant decision by Rehoboam to be a strongman

instead of the kind of servant leader that God desired. Like his father before him, Rehoboam learned to pant for power, wealth, and his own ego. Those things, not God, were the desires of his heart.

Genesis 1:28 presents us with the word “dominion.” The whole rest of the Bible tells us what **God** means by that word. It’s obvious what we humans mean by that word—that we can have total control over everyone and everything—that the blessed are the strong and the mighty; the winners; the ones with the biggest...whatevers. And there are places in the Bible where God shows us what happens when that human interpretation of “dominion” is put into practice. I think this story is the most obvious example, but there are certainly others. It isn’t pretty, and it ends poorly both for the strongmen and for those they rule.

But the central example of how **God** defines “dominion” comes when God decides that the best way to get the point across is to make the words God has already spoken take tangible form—to make God’s word become flesh and dwell among us. Jesus is born, not to King Herod, but to a poor carpenter and the faith-filled young woman he is engaged to marry.

When Rehoboam speaks to the crowds gathered to hear his decision, he says to them, “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.” When Jesus speaks to the crowds in Matthew 11, He says in verses 28-30, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

That is exactly what the old men of Solomon’s court advised Rehoboam to say. That would have prevented civil war. Jeroboam would have packed up his ten pieces of torn fabric and stitched them back together with the other two. And who knows what the world might look like today. But instead, it took ten centuries—an entire millennium—for a descendant of King David to finally make the right promise, the Godly promise, to God’s people. It is Jesus who showed the world, clearly in both word and deed, what God meant by the word “dominion” in Genesis 1:28.

The Rehoboam’s are on the rise around the globe, putting heavy yokes on their people and stinging them with scorpions. Will we follow and cheer them? Or will we thirst for the God embodied in Jesus, driven by our heart’s desire for God as strongly as the deer in Israel’s desert pants for water? It’s our choice. Amen.