

Succession| Good News from Bad Kings

"The Lamp of Hope"

1st Kings 15.1-24 (also 2nd Chronicles 13-16)

10.29.23

Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, Abijam became king over Judah. 2 He reigned three years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. 3 He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, like the heart of his father David. 4 But for David's sake the LORD his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem, to raise up his son after him and to establish Jerusalem; 5 because David did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and had not turned aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, except in the case of Uriah the Hittite. 6 There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all the days of his life.

7 Now the rest of the acts of Abijam and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? And there was war between Abijam and Jeroboam.

8 And Abijam slept with his fathers and they buried him in the city of David; and Asa his son became king in his place.

9 So in the twentieth year of Jeroboam the king of Israel, Asa began to reign as king of Judah. 10 He reigned forty-one years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. 11 Asa did what was right in the sight of the LORD, like David his father. 12 He also put away the male cult prostitutes from the land and removed all the idols which his fathers had made. 13 He also removed Maacah his mother from being queen mother, because she had made a horrid image as an Asherah; and Asa cut down her horrid image and burned it at the brook Kidron. 14 But the high places were not taken away; nevertheless the heart of Asa was wholly devoted to the LORD all his days. 15 He brought into the house of the LORD the dedicated things of his father and his own dedicated things: silver and gold and utensils.

16 Now there was war between Asa and Baasha king of Israel all their days. 17 Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and fortified Ramah in order to prevent anyone from going out or coming in to Asa king of Judah. 18 Then Asa took all the silver and the gold which were left in the treasuries of the house of the LORD and the treasuries of the king's house, and delivered them into the hand of his servants. And King Asa sent them to Ben-hadad the son of Tabrimmon, the son of Hezion, king of Aram, who lived in Damascus, saying, 19 "Let there be a treaty between you and me, as between my father and your father. Behold, I have sent you a present of silver and gold; go, break your treaty with Baasha king of Israel so that he will withdraw from me." 20 So Ben-hadad listened to King Asa and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel, and conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel-beth-maacah and all Chinneroth, besides all the land of Naphtali. 21 When Baasha heard of it, he ceased fortifying Ramah and remained in Tirzah. 22 Then King Asa made a proclamation to all Judah-- none was exempt-- and they carried away the stones of Ramah and its timber with which Baasha had built. And King Asa built with them Geba of Benjamin and Mizpah.

23 Now the rest of all the acts of Asa and all his might and all that he did and the cities which he built, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? But in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet. 24 And Asa slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David his father; and Jehoshaphat his son reigned in his place.

We're looking at the Period of the Monarchy in Ancient Israel. To be more specific, we're looking at the time of the divided nation – so, two monarchies – the nation in the North goes by the title of Israel or Samaria. The two tribes to the South (Judah and Benjamin) have Jerusalem and have access to the Temple; they are the nation of Judah.

Last week, we saw two evil kings, Jeroboam in the North; his name turns up over 90 times in the Bible (wouldn't that be wonderful, to have your name included in the best-selling book of all time?) After his death it usually occurs in a sentence like THIS: "The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did..." (2 Ki. 17.22) So, he's famous for introducing Israel to gross idolatry and even to child-sacrifice – so, INFamous and notorious (like Judas).

REhoboam in Jerusalem (South) was also a bad king... and we saw both of these evil men interrupted by God and kept from doing even more harm.

Today we meet two more kings of Judah (in the South) – a father and son OR perhaps (as we'll see later) a father and his half-brother. Abijam who doesn't know God and Asa, who does (one of eight kings who knows God).

Our theme today is hope – Emily Dickenson called it "the thing with feathers". To be without hope, to sink into hope-less-ness is despair and despair can kill you.

As you look at your own life and family, you may have lost hope for some member of your family OR at least for your relationship with that person. It may be a situation at work or in the home that looks so entrenched and permanent AND all but unbearable that you've lost hope that it will ever change. As you look at your SELF and your attempts to change, kick a habit or improve your health OR as you look at the world – the unspeakable evil we saw recently in the terrorist attacks in Israel, the war in Ukraine and on and on and one, it can make you feel helpless and hopeless.

We need more than just sort-of-mindless slogans or optimism (e.g., "Ya just gotta believe" "Everything always works out in the end"). Hope is not simply closing your eyes to the evil and the facts of our lives and world. Hope is not just crossing your fingers or wishing on a star. Hope is a kind of certainty regarding the future; it requires a basis, a rationale.

Let's look at: 1) The Dark Cloud (of HOPELESSNESS)
2) The Bright Lamp (SOURCE of HOPE)
3) The Life of Hope (CONTAGIOUS CONFIDENCE)

Let me point out three signs of despair in this passage – three ingredients in the dark cloud of hopelessness: disappointment, boredom and confusion/moral stupor.

The FIRST is the chronic frustration of hope. Whether it's an individual, a marriage, a church, a whole society, there are signs of better things coming... BUT they don't ever materialize. Disappointment repeated enough makes your "hoper" atrophy and wither and eventually it becomes a vestigial organ like an appendix. The Temple, wisdom and the kings have all disappointed and NOT secured shalom.

Every king comes to the throne and the people's hope is reignited: "Maybe THIS will be a righteous, just and good reign – WE HOPE!" But the cycle remains the same: "same as it ever was, same as it ever was..." And eventually the repetitive disappointment ultimately becomes... cynicism.

So too... we have to admit... our own society and plenty of people IN it, having been so often disappointed by our institutions and by people and the false promises of the American Dream of independence from everyone and everyTHING, have become deeply cynical.

A SECOND feature of hopelessness is boredom. Scholar, Peter Leithart, points out that the writer of Kings shows us that sin is boring. It promises excitement but it does not deliver. The cycle is so predictable and repetitive that it's boring to read. It's like reading Moby Dick where the reader FEELS what the sailors on the Pequod felt – the absolute tedium of the doldrums – at sea in a sailing vessel but with NO WIND. The reader feels that as we read what seem to be countless pages of details about equipment on board the whaling ship. In Kings too you feel the boredom – the pace of the narrative quickens (A LOT!) Years and kings are flying by but nothing really happens. Boredom.

Starting with the Desert Fathers in the Third Century, Christians started talking about this unholy boredom as one of the "seven deadly sins" called SLOTH or (more accurately) "ACEDIA", "the noonday demon". It's not simply laziness but a disconnection from God leading to carelessness in our thoughts, boredom leading to wandering thoughts and eventually to a kind of spiritual depression. And at that point, what appears to be laziness is actually spiritual despair, "what's the use?"

A king is born, rises to power, reigns, sins, sins more and more and more, then falls, then dies... Then, a king is born and the boring cycle continues. Sin is selfishness is boring.

The THIRD ingredient Kings highlights could easily go unnoticed and that is moral confusion, darkness, odd, secret stuff and conflict (war). Maybe you noticed that the two kings before us are father and son (Abijam father of Asa), but they have the same mother (vv. 2 & 10). This is either a case of Asa's grandmother being referred to as his mother because she did the heavy lifting in parenting him OR an incestuous union where a mother and her son have a child.

In either case – it's weird. And Asa (the good king) puts an end to grandma/mom Maacha's promotion of idolatry and has her "horrid image" burned at the Brook Kidron ("darkness").

When a society or a family or person loses hope, he or they leave the light and skulk around in secret, in privacy and behind closed doors. People don't walk in the light; they have alter-egos; they're not integrated persons. Weird.

Now, ironically, there's a little note in the story of Abijam saying that he walked in the sins of his father (that's Rehoboam) but THEN there's a contrast: "Abijam's heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, LIKE THE HEART OF HIS FATHER DAVID but, for David's sake, the LORD his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem..."

We continue to harken back to the Great Interruption (as we saw last week) – the manifold, multicolored, engaging grace of God transects the boring, monotone, colorless tedium of idolatry and sin. Starting with Abraham, the first Jew, God lit a lamp, God interrupted, He entered into a treaty, a pact, based solely on God's own faithfulness to Abraham's people – EVEN WHEN ABRAHAM HAD NO PEOPLE!

God's promise to Abraham is reiterated and HERE we're reminded that it was re-affirmed to David and to David's descendants. This LAMP would stay burning in the heart of God and could never be extinguished until God HIMSELF (with NO help from us) until God Himself brought the promise to fulfillment and completed the Covenant.

When the writer says, "for David's sake, the LORD ...gave him a lamp in Jerusalem" – it's a great SYMBOL and a great SOURCE OF HOPE. God keeps on reminding His people of this un-snuffable, unextinguishable lamp – a Covenant fueled by the unending Source of oil and light – God and HIS good intentions for His people.

Abijam was not a good king but he did some good things and even trusted in God (at least for some temporary help – in 2nd Chronicles) but Asa (his son...and er...uh...brother?) somehow DID trust in that lamp, the promise God made to Abraham, to David that GOD COULD BE TRUSTED and that God WOULD provide a King. And out of the blue (from a family of shady people and idolators) God raises up Asa to be a King who trusted in that burning lamp, the unquenchable light of hope – God's promise.

And WE know that IN THE FULNESS OF TIME (Gal. 4.4) God did indeed make good on that promise and God did indeed send a King. And this, most unlikely King, absorbed into His own self the hopelessness and despair and frustration that seems to haunt us as we travel through this life.

Jesus Christ was a kind of disappointment. He was NOT the Messiah people expected. Even His own disciples and family, even John the Baptist wondered if they had it wrong and that maybe Jesus was NOT the Messiah after all!

Jesus Christ was subjected to the boring tedium and monotony of life on this fallen planet. He was the fountain of living water but He's asking the woman for a drink in John CH 4. He witnessed and was subjected to a world that was constantly in pursuit of its next meal and of clothing and shelter... the mundane stuff of life on a cursed planet.

And all the weirdness and incestuous deviance and moral-confusion of a disintegrated world – all the perverse thoughts and actions of ALL HIS PEOPLE FROM ALL AGES fell on Him. He became disintegrated for me when MY moral darkness fell on Him and He was made to pay the price for my darkness. As Asa burned the idols of the Queen Mother at the Brook Kidron – so, the ideal King, Jesus Christ, walked over

that brook on His way to the Cross. The meaning of Kidron is “darkness”. Jesus Christ entered MY darkness. In Him the undimmed Lamp was dimmed and, for a moment, extinguished.

And in Him the Lamp was relit – a New Creation started when He rose from the dead. A new humanity is initiated of which HE is the Firstborn from the dead.

Abijam didn’t see this – his heart was NOT resting in the LORD and His Covenant. Asa, didn’t see it like we do – but still His heart was on God’s promises, in the Lamp of David that would burn on for all eternity. And therefore, Asa found great hope and did great acts of faith and love. He wasn’t perfect. He wavered and... he had bad feet – “feet of clay” we could say. He trusted in doctors more than in God and he entered into a political alliance that God forbade... but, by and large... Asa lived with hope...

His reign was interesting. It cut across the grain of the tedium of sin and idolatry.

To live a life of HOPE and not just “Suzy-Sunshine” positive, self-deception, you have to have a basis for your hope. You can’t just hope in hope or believe in belief.

And hope is dangerous: the MORE you hope, the more you lay yourself open to disappointment. But there is one Source of Hope that will never, ever disappoint you and that is the God who entered our hopelessness and emerged victorious – HOLDING out HOPE. This is the only true basis of hope.

He will, at last, completely dispel the darkness of despair and we will find that all our Christ-ward hopes were just. (Rev. 22.5) “And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.”

That’s why in the meantime, Christians have to be people of hope. That’s why we gather to worship – notice that Asa was a worshiper – he restored the Temple because worship is an expression and an activity that reconnects us to the Source of Hope. He could say with Jeremiah, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope: the LORD’S lovingkindnesses (HESED) indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.” (Lamentations 3.21-24)

Asa shows us that hope wavers – he had feet of clay and so do we – but the Source of Hope does not waver. Even when our prayers are not answered the way we wanted – still, we see the end and we see that God is working all things together for our good (Romans 8.28).

That not only inspires courage and confidence, and bolsters hope IN us... but it gives us this ability to spread it like a contagion, to inspire hope in others. As it says in Hebrews CH 10: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (23-24)

There’s a Reason for hope – and we can be carriers of the germ... spreaders of the Flame. So, let’s do!