

January 16, 2011

2 Kings 24:1-7

“Open to correction”

Over the past three weeks, those of us who are reading through the Bible in one year, with the guidance of J. Ellsworth Kalas’ materials, have swept through both I and II Kings.

These writings tell of the Hebrews in their Promised Land, and of the many kings who ruled them. Last week we read about great King David’s son, King Solomon, who seemed to lose his wisdom as time unfolded, eventually embracing competing faiths brought by his many foreign wives and concubines. Solomon was followed by his son Rehoboam, who rejected the northern ten tribes of Israel. The Kingdom divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, with the Northern Kingdom ruled by a former servant of Solomon, Jeroboam. The Northern Kingdom is called Israel at this point in Scripture. The Southern Kingdom, composed of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, is called Judah.

Jeroboam decided that if his people had to go to Jerusalem (the capital of the Southern Kingdom, Judah) for the major religious observances, his hold over them would be challenged and weakened. So, he offered them the alternate celebration plan with two golden calves, one in the north of his territory and the other in the south.

Scripture goes on to describe the various kings of both lands- the length of their reign (some only ruling one single day!), the conflicts they experienced (much of this could be called a civil war, with both nations at odds), and the time and manner of their deaths. The Bible often adds words like, “He did not do what is right in the sight of the Lord,” or “He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

The readings for this past week recount the decline and fall of both kingdoms. The first to go was the Northern Kingdom. Near the end there was a short run of kings who ruled briefly: Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah, as well as attempts at empires through assassinations: Pekah, Hosheah.

At the same time Assyria steadily grew in power. During Pekah’s reign a large part of the kingdom was shorn away and many Israelites were carried away into captivity. Assyrian conquest reduced the size of Israel in 734 B.C.

to an area of about thirty by forty miles. Shortly after that Hoshea murdered Pekah and ascended to the throne as a pro-Assyrian ruler. In the ninth year of his reign, 722 B.C., the land was taken by the Assyrians. This marks the end of the ten northern tribes. Their identity was lost through intermarriage, so today they are sometimes called the “ten lost tribes of Israel”.

The Assyrian king, having depopulated the northern territory, resettled it with populations that had been torn away from their homes in the eastern parts of the Assyrian empire. This mixing of people, cultures and faiths led to a syncretistic faith, a blending of a variety of traditions. This is the origin of the Samaritans, a people despised by Jews hundreds of years later during the time of Christ.

Kalas maintains that the Northern Kingdom never had a good king. Some were better than others, but even prophets as dedicated and amazing as Elijah and Elisha could not bring them back to ruling as agents of God’s Spirit and will. Kalas sees the story of the Northern Kingdom as a tale of steady decline and ultimate disappearance. The voices that challenged the nation were not heeded. The leaders and people were not open to correction.

As we consider the decline and fall of BOTH kingdoms, keep in mind that the Biblical writers had a different set of measurements than we often use in historical and political assessments of nations. The writers see morality and character as primary factors in the decline of nations. They see a commitment to God’s will as essential and primary, not only for kings and political leaders, but also the priests, prophets and people.

After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, which had been called Israel, we find that the Southern Kingdom, originally Judah, then is referred to as Israel also. The Southern Kingdom holds on for another hundred years, but also eventually falls. They had been blessed with many good kings: Joash, Hezekiah, Josiah. The Northern Kingdom’s kings were often compared in their evil to Jeroboam, but the Southern Kingdom’s kings were often compared in their goodness to the great King David.

These good leaders may have been what permitted the nation to endure so much longer than the Northern Kingdom. Certainly there were evil kings. Ahab saw the prophet Elijah as an enemy. But King Hezekiah sought out the prophet Isaiah for his advice and wisdom. King Josiah saw the discovery of a Book of the Law as a call to national repentance and renewal. At various

times the Southern Kingdom was led to be open to correction. The prophetic voices that denounced their ways were not seen always as treacherous or threatening to the nation, but sometimes they were heard as messages of grace, leading to repentance and changed ways.

Near the end of the kingdom, Manasseh became king, after his father Hezekiah. And Scripture tells us that he led the people into “the abominable practices of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel” (2 Kings 21:2) until at last he “misled them to do MORE evil” than those nations (2 Kings 21:9). He ruled 55 years, and then his son, Amon, ruled another two, following the same practices as his father.

Then came a good king: Josiah. During his reign he organized a celebration of the Passover, which no one had kept, Scripture states, “since the days of the judges” (2 Kings 23:22). This gives us an idea of the sorry state of affairs for these people whom God had brought out of slavery in Egypt long before.

Finally the Southern Kingdom fell into captivity just as the Northern Kingdom did more than a hundred years earlier. Israel was taken by the Assyrians, and Judah was taken by the Babylonians. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded. King Jehoiakim first agreed to servitude, but eventually rebelled. His son, Jehoiachin, took over, but he was forced to surrender to Babylon after only three months.

At this point we come to the Babylonian exile. Babylon took not only the riches of the kingdom, but the skilled people as well, leaving only the poorest people of the land. Zedekiah, Jehoiachin’s uncle was set up as a puppet king over those who remained. He tried later to rebel, but Jerusalem was totally crushed by the Babylonians.

The Biblical writers, as Kalas reminds us, “believed in the justice of God, that sin brings inevitable tragedy, whether it be the sin of individuals or of rulers; and it never occurred to them to think that Judah and Israel, though God’s chosen people, should be exempt.” Enemies of the Hebrews are often pointed to as unwitting agents of God, bringing the negative consequences of their behavior to an inevitable fulfillment. Thus, as Nebuchadnezzar came into the Southern Kingdom, in a way, he came as an agent of God. The people’s wandering from their faith had unavoidable consequences.

But Scripture also shows that when God's people suffer the consequences of their wrong choices, God does not abandon them.

It seems that the people of the south had enough good leaders through their history, so that they could cling to their faith even in captivity. This was an achievement the northern tribes couldn't manage. So, today, the people we identify as Jews are descendants of the southern tribes in the Southern Kingdom. They were open to correction by God's prophetic voice spoken at many and various times in their history. They were open to God's message of love and grace that makes true repentance and forgiveness possible.

They come as one, you see: repentance and grace. If we refuse to be corrected, as individuals and nations, there is no way to receive forgiveness and find a new way forward. We lose sight of God. We drift away and dissolve as did the ten northern tribes of Israel. GOD doesn't leave us; WE leave God.

This isn't an easy matter. It can be difficult to discern that divine voice of correction.

Long ago, my two older children, then 5 and 7, attended a backyard Bible club during a hot Nebraska summer. After the first day, as my older son was getting ready for bed, he asked me, "Could bad dreams be a punishment from God?" I was distressed and told him his bad dreams were NOT a punishment from God; that God loved him and would never want to frighten him. I discovered he had talked about this at the backyard Bible club. I wasn't sure that I wanted him to return there the next day. But he protested, saying he really wanted to go—and he even showed me the certificate he'd received, attesting to the fact that that day he had accepted Jesus Christ into his heart. I decided to let him participate, but asked him to fill me in on what they did and discussed each day. He did have a wonderful time. My daughter, who was less excited about the whole thing, decided to finish the week as well. But she waited until the very last day, to decide to let Jesus into her heart, bringing the certificate home that Friday.

Remember how Jesus' followers wondered, when they met a man born blind, "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2) And Jesus said, "Neither. His being born blind provides an opportunity for God's glory to be revealed!" And he healed the man. Remember how, when crowds had been massacred by Herod's troops, and people had been

crushed by a fallen tower, the crowds asked, “Who sinned that these punishments occurred?” (Luke 13:4) And Jesus said the people weren’t any greater sinners than anyone else, and that misfortunes and death can remind all of us that we could die at any time, and should therefore take our relationship with God and our neighbors as critically important **RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW!!**

So, my friends, please don’t view every tragedy or calamity, or scary dream as a punishment for sin, or as God’s voice of correction. However, when the tragedy, calamity or dream arise from choices we have made that are not God’s will—they may speak words of correction, calling us to repentance.

We need each other to discern the difference. My husband and I watched a movie last Friday night, “Gone, baby, gone”. It was definitely a very highly “R” rated movie, but it raised powerful questions about what is right and what is wrong. How do we discern the right thing? Gilles and I were shouting at each other as the film ended, because we didn’t have the same perspective. Finally, we calmed down and realized we just needed to drop the subject because we did not see things the same way. But over the last couple days we find ourselves bringing a new thought about the film to the other. We seem to be coming closer together in our points of view. This film helped us see that discerning right and wrong is something we wrestle with—and vital for living with integrity.

As Christians we need the words and writings of other Christians seeking to live faithful lives throughout history and around the world. We need communities of faith, like this church, where we worship, study, reflect, sharing burdens and joys, learning day by day, walking the talk, following the example of others, setting an example for others.

Please, make no mistake—**WE ALL NEED TO BE OPEN TO CORRECTION.** Every day. Every day. Amen.