

## Josiah's Reform

You are probably wondering why I chose a dumpster fire for today's bulletin cover. We talked about the period of the Judges and Kings of Israel and Judah a couple of weeks ago in confirmation. I used this photo to sum up most of that period in Israel's history. The reign of almost all the kings was a dumpster fire.

The monarchy, established most firmly during David's rule, was still in place, but by the time of Josiah was confined to Judah. Assyria had conquered and scattered Israel and that land would become Samaria.

As I said, the monarchy after David was largely a dumpster fire. The books of first and second kings show the rise and fall of the monarchy. The kings repeatedly led the nation away from worship of Yahweh and the nation fell into worship of other gods. And because behavior follows worship, they also abandoned the other laws of the covenant.

There were five exceptions in Judah...five Kings who were faithful and, in some way, brought reform. Hezekiah, Josiah's great grandfather was one. But perhaps the most notable was Josiah.

At this point, Assyria's power is waning. Judah, or at least some of it, survived that threat. There is no imminent threat to Judah. There's a good king reigning. You might think all would be well.

Josiah decides it's time to repair the Temple which had been allowed to deteriorate. He sends the high priest and his assistants to collect the Temple money and pay the workers to fix it.

In the process of fixing it, an ancient scroll was found. Hilkiah, the high priest, gave it to his secretary to take and read to King Josiah. Josiah is mortified as he listens. He realizes he's hearing the words of God's covenant with Israel – probably a section of the book of Deuteronomy. He knows how far Judah has gone astray, and he knows from the book that it could lead to Judah's downfall.

The book gets taken to one of the few female prophets in the Old Testament, Huldah. She confirms what it is. She tells Josiah he does need to begin a reform process, but she also says it's too late to save Judah. However she assured him Judah's downfall wouldn't happen until after Josiah was gone.

Josiah gathers the whole community – from young and old, rich and poor, prophets, priests, government officials, and ordinary shopkeepers and landowners. He reads the book to the whole community.

They are all moved by hearing God's word and they all recommit to the covenant God made with their ancestors.

We didn't read about it today, but the yearly Passover festival, which had been largely forgotten, was reinstated. But Huldah was right – it was too late.

Josiah's first son would take the throne for only three months, and his second son would reign over Jerusalem's capture by Babylon.

OK, so this might be interesting if you're a Bible history nerd – which I am, although even I have a hard time getting into all the stories of the kings. Once you get the gist of the dumpster fire, it's pretty repetitive.

We've already talked a couple of weeks about what Israel's failures were – idolatry, greed, violence, and failure to care for the poor and vulnerable.

And really all their failures stem from idolatry...the shattering of the covenant all stemmed from turning away from God.

I think the most helpful thing for us in this story is the powerful impact God's word had on Josiah. God's word has the power to change lives...even whole nations.

But we also know that God's word as presented in the Bible has been used to justify terrible things – things like the Crusades, slavery, hate crimes, anti-Semitism, and Christian nationalism.

So how do we interpret the Bible in a way that is for good and not evil? Can Josiah help us?

Well, let's look again at what Josiah did. The first thing he did was have it read aloud to him. We do that too – we have scripture read aloud to us every week.

He got his own first impression from that. But then what did he do next? He took it to his prophet, Huldah. She was the expert. She helped with the interpretation.

We live in this weird time when people have a tendency to think that because of the internet, they can be experts on everything from medicine to the constitution to the Bible. Some are even suspicious of higher education and educated people.

Now, we do need to be able to think for ourselves. We shouldn't just willy nilly always accept what someone else tells us. But people who have studied the Bible a lot can be very helpful partners when we are discerning how to interpret the Bible and use it in our lives. Presumably, that's part of why churches pay pastors.

Josaih also first wrestled with the text with a few of his closest advisors. And then he gathered the whole community to hear it read aloud to them.

And then, they committed to living it. And the living of it would lead them back to the covenant and to Yahweh, their God. Living it would take them back to living the laws that governed worship and how they were to treat one another.

That is perhaps the most important thing about all of this. Scripture is most effective when read and interpreted as a community. There is nothing wrong with reading scripture solo. Our own individual lives can be transformed by God's word. But scripture is vulnerable to misinterpretation. However much some people want to say the Bible is very clear and with no contradictions, it's just not so.

Interpreting in a community makes us...or at least should make us...look at it in ways we might never have thought of. That happens to me every time I lead a Bible study or participate in a weekly text study...and I'm supposed to be one of those "experts."

That community can be a check for us when our interpretation leads us astray.

And that brings us to where the real test is. We read and interpret scripture as a community because we are then called to live it – just like the people of Judah.

When the people of Judah heard the word of God, it led them back to the covenant. And that's really where the rubber meets the road – how does our interpretation of scripture as a community lead us to live?

Does it make us more faithful to God? Does it make us more faithful to God's commandments to love God and love other people? Or does it lead us to idolatry and hate?

I'll rephrase a popular saying I've seen online – if your interpretation of scripture leads you to hate a person or group of people or think of them as less deserving, or even worse, as less than human, you need to rethink your interpretation.

There is a nationwide group called Justice in Action. It's an interfaith group that focuses on local justice issues. Lincoln has a local chapter that began about a year ago. I attended their kick off for this year a few weeks ago.

Their big event each year is called the Nehemiah Action Assembly. It's a really good example of using scripture to shape a community.

Nehemiah was a prophet after the exile. He was part of the rebuilding of Jerusalem – both physically and spiritually.

In Chapter 5 of Nehemiah, when it was clear the ruling and wealthy classes were still exploiting the less powerful, he gathered an assembly and worked to restore the commitment of the community, and especially the rulers, to live by God's law.

Modern day Nehemiah assemblies in the Justice in Action organization do the same thing – they pick a couple of issues to focus on. Last year, for Lincoln and Lancaster County, they were mental health and criminal justice reform. This year affordable housing will be added. Then the group lobbies those in local and state government to try to get changes made that will help people affected.

Both Nehemiah and Josiah would be proud.

Lots of bad stuff has been done in response to faulty interpretation of scripture. There are plenty of people who would make the case we should just toss it. And we still have our share of dumpster fires brought about sometimes by those who think they know what the Bible clearly says.

We have a more illuminating Word to help us...that Word became flesh. That Word lived and taught among human beings. That Word helps us to better interpret all of scripture. And when we do that, God's word really does have the power to transform the world into the place of peace and love God intended it to be.