

“God Is At Work”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Reformation NL 2019

1Kings 12: 1-17, 25-29

It’s Reformation Sunday—the time when we remember the beginning of the protest movement that eventually became the Lutheran Church. And we’re given this story in 1 Kings which actually has some points of connection with our Reformation history.

I’ll give some context to this story in a minute but for the moment, I just want to note that it’s a story of major social and political division—and it’s filled with self-serving political leaders. So, it may have a thing or two to say to the moment we are living in now.

Some people think of the Books of Kings as history. First and Second Kings look like history—they are filled with accounts of power struggles and regime changes. But the focus of Kings is really on God. This is a theological history where the most important revelations are about where God is at work.

This is very much at odds with the way we see the political world around us. Many of us kind of bend over backwards to avoid bringing God into our assessments about what is going on. But the biblical view is different and because of that, both hard to appreciate and—quite possibly—what we need.

We are living in a political mess that—to my way thinking—bears no resemblance to the Kingdom of God. We are where we are because of human actions—human failings—on many levels. It looks like God has left the house—left us to deal with the mess we’ve made.

But the word of God that comes to us through this story in Kings, is that God is at work in this world—in this mess. God is at work right now in the division that defines our government and extends to every corner of this country. God is still working to accomplish God’s purposes.

I want to give some context to this story from the first book of Kings. Last week we were with King David. He ruled for 40 years—and under his rule, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were united. David’s son, Solomon becomes king when David dies. The popular impression of Solomon is about how wise he was. He’s known for building the Temple in Jerusalem—and for his hundreds of wives and mistresses and the massive wealth that he accumulated for himself.

Solomon ruled over the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah but he was not a unifier. He was not a leader who thought about the whole country. He was a leader who couldn’t get enough of his own building projects. And these projects were costly and labor intensive. What this meant for the average person was more taxes—and forced labor. These building projects were not sources of new jobs—they were basically a return to the kind of slavery they had known in Egypt when they had to make bricks all day for Pharaoh.

So, for many of the people, the death of Solomon was not a sad occasion.

That's where our story starts today. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, is crowned king. But there's an immediate challenge to his rule from another leader, Jeroboam. Jeroboam represents the northern tribes—who apparently have borne the brunt of the forced labor policies. He goes to Rehoboam and asks him to move away from these harsh, dehumanizing policies that his father instituted.

King Rehoboam consults with two groups of advisors. The elder statesmen advise him to be a leader who serves the people—be a leader who listens to their needs. End the forced labor policy, they say.

Next, King Rehoboam consults with the young men who fawn over him and just love their status as confidants of the king. One commentator calls them the “frat boys.” The main point is they are exceedingly immature—they tell him what he wants to hear—including the perfect vulgar response, which in cleaned up language is, “if you thought you had it hard under my father's rule, just wait til you see what I've got in store for you.”

King Rehoboam goes with the advice he wanted to hear. And the result is the division of the kingdom. The northern tribes of Israel break away from the southern tribe of Judah and Jeroboam becomes their king.

This story is a familiar one. A sadly familiar one. People in power ignore the needs of the oppressed and take the road that they believe serves their interests. Groups of people—parts of nations—secede—breakaway—rebel.

But I want to draw your attention to a part of the story that is strange to our ears. It's verse 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.”

Said more simply: *This division of the kingdom is God's will.*

God's purposes are being worked out through this division.

That's more than a bit jarring because we think—rightly—about God being the One who brings it all together. That unity and harmony are what God wills for the world. But, surely, God does not want a false unity or a forced unity.

Jesus prayed for his followers to be one. Could it be that the division that happened 502 years ago at the time of the Reformation was God's will? Is it possible that God's purposes were being worked through this massive religious and social upheaval?

This was a time of massive building projects for the Roman Catholic Church—chiefly, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. There are indeed some parallels with Solomon's building of the Temple. What brought it all to a breaking point for Martin Luther—an Augustinian priest and biblical scholar—was that the poor were paying for it. The church was selling something called indulgences—tickets for forgiveness.

And Luther said, “Forgiveness is not for sale. It's a gift from God—given freely through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. You can't pay for it or earn it by money or good works. It's a gift.”

Luther was a human being—and just as imperfect as the rest of us. He was not a flawless leader—he wrote and said awful things that have been used toward disastrous ends. But, he did see—with a clarity

that few others had at the time—the essential truth of the Gospel—that God’s love and acceptance cannot be bought or sold—that it cannot be earned or lost. It is ours forever.

This essential truth of the Gospel—500+years on—is recognized and appreciated by the Roman Catholic Church. I think there are many Christians—Catholics and Protestants alike—who would say that God’s purposes were at work through the division and upheaval of the Reformation.

But we are still a work in progress.

We are still trying to grasp what this amazing grace of God is all about. At least, I hope we are. For those of us who grew up surrounded by this word—this idea of grace—of God’s complete and utter acceptance of us—I think we risk taking it for granted—or not really believing it.

In my years here, I have met very few confirmation students who really believe in this radical love we call grace. I think some of them believed it when they were younger but then they hit the judgment world of adolescence. And maybe the idea that God could love you no matter what—that God could love everyone no matter what—just seems way too naïve.

And the questions about grace are not limited to teens.

All of this is to say that we have a lot of reforming still to do—a lot of growth still to come.

For me, the path we’re on is expressed in two hymns we’re singing today. We began with “A Mighty Fortress”—a rousing piece of music that masterfully expresses the truth of Psalm 46. God is the one who preserves our lives—not just our bodies but our souls—the essence of who we are. It’s a statement of faith—of confidence in who God is and what God can do.

It’s also a picture of protection and of walls—a fortress—that keeps us safe. All of this is true but it is not enough. It is not an ending point.

The second hymn is *Blest Christ*—a hymn we commissioned for our 125th anniversary. Joy wrote the music and Susan Cherwin wrote the words based in part on our vision statement: *We are a faith-rooted community with no walls: always learning, always serving.* We are not there yet—but we are on a journey.

Blest Christ expresses the truth of the Gospel—that God’s radically inclusive love—God’s grace--builds no walls. In fact, God’s grace tears walls down. This is the path of grace. At the time of the Reformation, what loomed so large was the division. But in that division, a truth was unleashed that can lead to the end of all division.

It’s hard to see God’s purposes when you’re living in the midst of upheaval, but I believe I’ve seen some glimpses. In this time of great political and social division—in this time rampant with self-serving leaders on our national stage—God is at work. God is at work in the division—and *it may even be that this division we are experiencing now is God’s will—that it is the way in which God’s purposes are being worked out.*

I don’t have any other way to account for the #MeToo movement that has resulted in real changes in how women are treated—and in how women see themselves. Who could have ever thought this would happen in a time when crude misogyny has been revealed at the highest levels of leadership?

Likewise, the way in which we talk about race in this country has rapidly gone to a whole new level—in a way that I never thought possible. Yes, there is conflict and division and hurt and confusion—and hate. But this is not new. What is new is that it is visible in a way that no one can ignore—in a way that makes us talk about it.

Many of us are newly aware of the people who are being left behind by a rapidly changing economy—masses of people across this country who—until now—felt they were invisible. They were simmering in their pain and resentment. But now they are seen.

This *is* a hard time—it is a divisive time and an uncertain time. But as people of faith—as people who seek to have our lives rooted in trusting God—we have the possibility of responding out of that place. We have the possibility of trusting that God is indeed in this—working God’s purposes out.

Working God’s grace out.

Because that *is* God’s purpose—to love the world into being a world where Love rules.

Thanks be to God. Amen.