

2020: The Global Year of the Bible  
June 7, 2020

A Lamp and a Light, Part 21  
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As we begin today, let's quickly review why almost all of the sermons for 2020 are called "A Lamp and a Light." I pulled the phrase out of Psalm 119:105, "*Your Word is a lamp for my feet and light for my path.*" Because 2020 was designated last fall as the Global Year of the Bible, a significant number of folks in the congregation made the commitment to read through the Bible together this year. Some are using a Bible reading plan and their own Bibles, others purchased a Daily Bible, organized chronologically. The sermons for this year are being taken from the readings from the previous week to keep us all on the same path as we ponder anew our faith history. Joni Frey said last Sunday how grateful she is that we have been reading together even though we are apart. She said having specific readings each day has helped to keep her on track and focused. I agree! And I think many others would agree also!

This week in our readings in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles we come to a true turning point in the history of Israel, a turning point that reminds us that *foolish actions* often have unintentional consequences far greater than anything we could ever imagine. Foolish actions often result in multiple lives being irreversibly affected.

The history of the nation of Israel has been a rocky one. From slavery in Egypt, through the parted Red Sea, through 40 years of wandering trying to find their way with God and one another. They obeyed, they rebelled, they repented, they confessed, they obeyed, they rebelled.... A cycle of doing life God's way then my way, then God's way, etc. Can anyone relate to that? Unfortunately, as sinners we can all relate to that.

Israel remained a united nation, a united kingdom under Kings Saul, David, & Solomon. Solomon, if you remember from last week, started out strong, started out faithful, but he ended poorly (to say the least). It was Solomon's foolish turning to the gods of his foreign wives that caused his downfall. I mean, 'hello!' the man had 700 royal wives and 300 concubines.

As he got older (his defenses were weakened) his allegiance shifted to pagan gods from the one who had given him everything and then some. His allegiance, his worship transferred from the One True God to false gods. 1 Kings 11:6 reports, "*Solomon did evil before the Lord; he did not remain loyal to the Lord like his father David did.*"

So, God announced that he would tear the kingdom away from him, but *because of the legacy of his father David*, God mercifully delayed this judgment until after Solomon died. Solomon's foolishness in turning away from the Lord and turning to false gods had incredible negative consequences for the nation of Israel that are still felt today.

Rehoboam was Solomon's son who took over the rule of the kingdom. When he came into power the people came to him and asked him to lighten up a bit on them. King Solomon, towards the end of his life had worked them ruthlessly (seems he had already forgotten his own history of his people being worked ruthlessly by Pharaoh in Egypt...). Rehoboam told the people that he would think about it. His counselors said this (1 Kings 12:7), "*If you will be a servant to this people today, will serve them, grant them their petition, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever.*" That sounds like great advice. But apparently that was not what he wanted to hear, and so he turned to his old pals and asked them what to do. Maybe they had started to like the good life they were beginning to enjoy on the coat-tails of their up-and-coming old friend and didn't want anything to change.... Maybe.

So, here is what they advised, "*Say this to these people who say to you, 'Your father made us work hard, but now lighten our burden.' Say this to them: 'I am a lot tougher than my father. My father imposed heavy demands on you; I will make them even heavier. My father punished you with regular whips; I will punish you with whips that really sting your flesh.'*" (1 Kings 12:10-11)

I doubt Rehoboam thought the nation would divide over this harsh and foolish decision, but that's what happened. *"When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they said, "We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse. Return to your homes, O Israel! Now, look after your own dynasty, O David! So Israel returned to their homes."* (I Kings 12:16)

Ten of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel walked out on Rehoboam that day. The united kingdom of Israel became a divided kingdom – Judah in the south with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (the capitol being Jerusalem) – and Israel in the north with the other 10 tribes (the capitol being Samaria). Jeroboam became the elected king of the northern kingdom, and trust me, he wasn't anyone to brag about.

Jeroboam was told by God (1 Kings 11:38,39) that if he followed his instructions and did what God approves, keeping God's rules and commandments like David did, then He would be with him and establish a lasting dynasty for him. What a promise! But Jeroboam didn't listen. He was afraid the divided kingdom of Judah and Israel would reunite if he did what God said to do, and he was liking being the big kahuna. He liked being king. So, he did a very foolish thing: he established a counterfeit religion for the northern kingdom of Israel to follow. A counterfeit religion.

He made two golden calves and put one towards the northern end and one towards the southern end of his kingdom. He told the people that they didn't need to go to Jerusalem anymore to worship at the Temple, they could worship these golden calves and get along just fine with God. And they bought it. How weak must their faith have been to buy that, hook, line, and sinker. But let's be real, we might have bought it too. Who wanted to go back to where that tyrant Rehoboam was for anything?

And he, Rehoboam in the south, didn't do much better as a spiritual leader even though he was in Jerusalem where the glorious temple was that his father Solomon had built. I Kings 14:22-24 tells us that the southern kingdom of Judah committed the same horrible sins as the nations that the Lord had driven out from before the Israelites.

After all God had done for this nation, due to pride, the hunger for power, and due to blatant and foolish disobedience by serving self and serving false gods, God's beloved unified nation of Israel became a divided nation.

This should sound all-too-familiar right now. We are living in a very divided nation, aren't we? This has been very evident the last 4 years since Donald J. Trump announced his intention to run for President. The for-Trump vs. the against-Trump groups set up CAMP and have never broken camp.

In fact, both camps just seemed to get bigger, louder, and more insistent – demanding that their view was the only right view. The United States of America? I haven't seen that country for a long time, not since 9/11/01.

But then back in March, when almost all of the nation was hunkered down, cheering on the heroes taking care of the sick and dying from the coronavirus, it felt better. Our nation seemed more unified around a common purpose of caring for one another, of encouraging one another with zoom concerts, and John Krasinski's *Some Good News*, and neighborhood socially distanced dance parties, and phone calls to check in, and cards just to say hello.

And then after about 4 weeks, maybe 6, we fell apart, literally, again. Two camps, three camps, four camps. And we started looking at each other as being either reckless or ridiculous, as being naïve or being callous or cynical. Even within the church. Where is the true leading of the Holy Spirit? If your faith is in Jesus, it's right here in our hearts. But are we learning, are we listening, and are we leading from that place of peace, or is our allegiance turning towards some other voice?

And now, now, our nation seems even more divided than it did two weeks ago because of the horrible, violent deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor - all of which were violent acts of injustice that need to be renounced. Watching those videos of Floyd &

Arbery's deaths (which I never did all the way through) was painful at the deepest level. No one, white, black, or every hue in between, deserves to die like they died.

Protests rose up. And they should. We should protest when injustices have happened. We need to call our leaders to account. But protests should be peaceful, not violent – or we have silenced what is being protested with destruction, noise, and hate. Folks, we cannot let the devil win. We cannot let blatant, ongoing injustices get buried or ignored again.

Here's where I am as your pastor – a pastor of a congregation that is not like-minded in all things. Shocking – right? No! We are left, right, middle, blue, red, independent – we have different thoughts and views and opinions for a variety of reasons – but often because of how we were brought up, where we work, and either negative positive experiences we have had. I'm pastoring all of you to help us think biblically. To help us respond as Christ would have us respond. Just like everything having to do with our discipleship, this takes work. It takes effort not to just knee jerk react. It takes effort not to set up our own counterfeit religion out of foolish pride or blatant disobedience.

We must think about the messages that run through our minds about people who are different in some way than us. I have been alerted these last days to some things within me that need attention. I grew up with a mom from the south. Need I say more? And yet, God in his mercy, knowing the position he would put me in eventually, put people in my life from a very early age whose skin color was a whole lot darker than mine, people I grew to love and remember to this day with such fondness. But just because I care about, just because I truly love some people with dark skin and seek out their company, doesn't mean my thoughts towards non-white skinned people are pure. They are not. I know they are not. I could give you examples, but I trust you have your own if you are being truly honest with yourself.

One of the things I was alerted to this past week as I listened and listened some more to very wise & biblically minded leaders speak about this, I was alerted to the message we unintentionally send in our 98% white-skinned church. Think about this with me, will you? Please try hard not to reject what I am about to say without truly thinking prayerfully about it.

When we leave the valley to go on mission trips either here in the states or internationally, often when we return with our pictures and our memories, the pictures of people we helped are dark-skinned, black or brown or every hue in-between people. Many of the 56 children we sponsor through Compassion International are dark-skinned children whose pictures we put up on the screen once a year on Compassion Sunday. Unintentionally we may be sending a message to our children sitting beside and around us, that black people need what white people can do for them. Unintentionally we are planting the SEED of a message *that the devil takes and runs with*, that we (whites) are somehow better or more blessed because we can ride in on the proverbial white horse and 'save them.'

This is completely unintentional. I never thought about this until this past week as I tried to listen and learn. But what we think about people different than us starts a 'tape' inside our heads that is hard to erase – and we have to be aware. We have to be careful. We cannot afford foolishness. We have to make sure we are balancing what is perceived, what the devil can take and twist, with what Jesus has taught and modeled for us.

Let's think about what happens during the mission trip. During the trip the mission team finds themselves blessed. They find themselves receiving more than they give. In their minds at the moment it's not about what they have arrived to do for someone different than them, but what they can do to serve. It's not about black vs. white or have vs. have-nots. It's about servanthood, about connection, about relationship, and about love. But what might be perceived and planted could be something very different.

We need to have some truly honest conversations with each other and with people who look different than we look. The goal is not to become 'color-blind.' As I heard a black man say this past week on one of my Christian podcasts, "We all want to be seen, loved, accepted. We all want to have a purpose. We are alike in this. But don't tell me that you don't see color. I need

you to see color," he said. "God made me this way just like God made you that way. Let us honor everything about each other and learn from and grow with each other in Christ."

A beautiful prayer in our Book of Common Worship prays these words, *"Help us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from various cultures and with different talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity through Jesus Christ the Lord."*

I am so 'on board' with that. I believe that with all that I am. I believe that we cannot enjoy the fulfillment of our humanity on our own surrounded only by people just like us – otherwise God would have made us all the same! We need our red, yellow, black, and white brothers and sisters around us, helping us, speaking into our lives, in order to be our full made-in-God's-image selves.

And so, what do we do in our communities in between and over these mountains that are primarily caucasian rural Americans?

1. We make a commitment to learn by listening to wise, godly voices outside our community,
2. by talking with one another,
3. by sharing ways we know we are failing,
4. and praying for one another.

Personally, I have joined a group of leaders in Chambersburg who will be meeting over zoom starting Monday evening June 8<sup>th</sup> using a curriculum from *Be the Bridge*. Suzanne Foley from Park Avenue Pharmacy approached me on Friday and offered to come share in a group her experience as a white woman married to a black man – and what she's seen and heard and learned.

Parents and grandparents, it would be great for you to have books for your young children that show a variety of cultures and a variety of skin hues. Last week I braved Target and purchased two new barbie dolls for my little granddaughters. I bought a black barbie and a white barbie. The first day one of them came over, I could tell she wasn't sure about that black barbie. The next day, she chose to play with the black barbie first.

Here's my challenge as your pastor: Make a decision about what you are you going to do to make sure you are thinking biblically about where we are. Ask God to show you how your life can better reflect the life of Jesus. What are you going to do to be part of the healing of our nation?

Recently on Facebook the following message by Leslie Dwight appeared and was widely shared:

What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for? A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw – That it finally forces us to grow. A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us from our ignorant slumber. A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change. Work for change. Become the change. A year we finally band together, instead of pushing each other further apart. What if 2020 is the most important year of them all?

Golly, I feel like that's what I've been preaching since mid-March. God wants to speak into this. Everything we've been through. Everything we are still going through. He's been speaking into this. He is calling us to be as Jesus prayed we would be in John 17, <sup>20</sup> *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,* <sup>21</sup> *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* <sup>22</sup> *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one —* <sup>23</sup> *I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

He's calling us to be one as he and the Father are one. Not *blindly* one. Whatever you do, I'll do. Whatever you believe, I'll believe. Whatever you want, I'll go along with it. Whatever

you think, I'll think. No! He is calling us to be one in purpose. One in purpose. A *purpose* is something set up as an object or end to be attained. Something you are aiming for. Something you are intent on achieving. An idea. A goal. A dream.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, a goal, a purpose that *all people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character*. That's a good start, church. A great start. But as the church, let's take it one step further because guess what? One of our Core Values is "We are welcoming to everyone."

Let's make it our dream, our goal, our purpose that all people would find the Church, the Body of Christ on earth, to be a place of love and acceptance. Why? Because of this one unifying, irreversible reality:

**We are all sinners and the blood of Jesus was shed ONCE to redeem ALL.**

**Once for all.**

May our divided kingdoms fall as we invest in the work of the Kingdom of God – a kingdom of justice, mercy, and love. Amen.