

“Our Forgetfulness, God’s Faithfulness”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; November 24, 2019

2 Kings 22:1-23:3

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying, “Go up to the high priest Hilkiyah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the Lord; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the Lord, repairing the house, that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.” The high priest Hilkiyah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” When Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, “Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the Lord.” Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book.” Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.

When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king’s servant Asaiah, saying, “Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” So the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her. She declared to them, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the Lord, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the Lord. Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place.” They took the message back to the king.

Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

A few months ago, Javen and I were up north with his parents, enjoying his sister Briana’s visit from the Netherlands and meeting her Portuguese boyfriend Pedro. Javen’s mom took the occasion to return to

Javen a few artifacts from his childhood, including some stuffed animals and two hard-shell cases of Legos. I'll never forget Javen's immediate enchanted response to the Legos. I watched his eyes light up, heard an exclamation of delight, and saw 35-year-old hands become those of a six-year-old again, reaching into the cases to play with wheels, platforms, and hard plastic assemblies left over from when he had played with them last. To me as an outsider, these Legos looked like old artifacts from an earlier time, but to Javen they were a portal back to childhood. We had found again a treasure whose value had been forgotten.

King Josiah makes his own rediscovery in today's reading, finding a treasure of wisdom and law that all the people had forgotten about. Josiah builds a reputation for faithfulness early on, becoming king of Judah when he was only eight years old. He's compared to none other than the greatest king, David. Josiah is most known for an ancient "back-to-the-Bible" movement and series of reforms, which started when he renovated the great temple to God in Jerusalem. The temple had fallen into disrepair by the neglect of prior kings, but Josiah essentially gave a blank check in order to restore its former glory. During construction, Josiah's officials discovered a book, hidden long ago. You see, a whole line of unrighteous Hebrew kings had elevated other gods, persecuted the followers of Yahweh, and forced their religion underground. Scholars believe that what ancient priests must have hid in the temple was a copy of what we now know as the book of Deuteronomy—a set of instructions from Moses for how to behave in order to please God and find abundant life. Josiah recognizes the echoes of truth in this ancient text. Rather than tossing it out, he investigates more deeply.

Sometimes what we discover in history is not always easy, though. The prophetess Huldah, a reliable steward of God's voice, interprets the words of Deuteronomy for Josiah and his officials. She tells him, basically, "I have a lot of bad news and a little good news." The bad news is, this book's judgments on unrighteous, unfaithful Judah are going to come to pass. Evil has been done over generations, God's law and temple have slipped into disrepair, and the people of Josiah's time are on the hook. It doesn't matter if the current people aren't the ones who forgot the laws and lost the way. They bear responsibility for the sins of earlier people, much as our current culture must grapple with centuries of unchecked and worsening carbon pollution, or 400 years of African American enslavement. God doesn't turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of ancestors, and the natural consequences of those sins will be calamitous for Judah. The good news from Huldah for Josiah, though, is that at least destruction won't come in his lifetime.

We see Josiah's character by how he responds in this moment. He could grimace at the long-term forecast, but give thanks that it's not coming in *his* time, lament that it's too late, or otherwise punt on taking responsibility. Nevertheless, Josiah persists in a series of reforms to help the people better follow the ways of God as described in this Book of the Law. He models leaning into the new, more challenging way, not shirking from duties but rising to the moment of history that he's in.

When we rediscovered the Legos from the basement of Javen's parents, Javen didn't *actually* turn into a six-year-old boy again. In fact, something more precious happened—we played with them all together. Thirty-, forty-, and sixty-something grown adults sat around a table for more than an hour, creating airplanes, helicopters, vehicles and homes with these little plastic blocks. Pedro, Briana's boyfriend from Portugal, is an air traffic controller, and I'll never forget the joyful laughter as he conducted the radio conversation with Javen to coach a Lego plane from the sky to the runway. These long-forgotten toys served a new purpose when they were found, and they have cemented a relationship of affection with Pedro. Something old, rediscovered, was not discarded or simply restored, but instead led to something new.

In like manner, the book that's discovered while Josiah was restoring the temple is not put high on an altar somewhere or stared at with distant reverence. The book is an opportunity for new devotion, as it's given new life and read aloud three different times in this passage. The third reading is in the presence of all the people who gather with Josiah, "the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great."

Josiah's faithfulness invites a response from others, so that all the people respond with their own faith, recommitting to the covenant. Again, the treasure that was found shows its worth not only in its original character, but in what new joyful living becomes possible because of its new expression.

Despite this hopefulness and commitment to a renewed covenant, I'm mindful that the nation of Judah was not saved. Thirty years after the events of this reading, Josiah dies, the rising power of Babylon invades Judah, and the nation is conquered forever. Their sacred scrolls and artifacts from the temple are carried away to Babylon. However, even though the artifacts that led to faithful renewal were removed, the revived covenant relationship to God was not lost to history with them. Even *now*, millennia later, people faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still gather with gratitude and thanksgiving. The God who secures this covenant remains steadfast, faithful to the end of the age.

As we grapple with the weight of history on our own time, may that be a comfort and a reminder. We may or may not be able to overcome the mortal threats of today's Babylons: of climate change, systemic racism, or the loss of faith in government and media. It is a real possibility that these threats to our nation may prevail, and we'll be led captive to other unholy ideologies. However, God does not give up on us, and entrusts us (like the people of Josiah's time) with the calling to remember, restore, and build anew whatever the circumstances. So this week that is our invitation, standing at the future's threshold. May whatever honored traditions we encounter in this week of Thanksgiving, and whatever relics from the past that you reexamine, be occasions for new memory and sustained gratitude. Yet not only gratitude, but also a spurring and prompting to create a new covenant for the days yet to come. And trust that God will be faithful to all the covenants throughout history, extending salvation to us by the undying, eternal love and witness of Jesus. Thanks be to God! Amen.