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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's Old Testament reading is about kings and succession to the Israelite throne. And even years before the people of Israel had kings, the possibility of them was on God's mind, it seems. In the book of Deuteronomy, not long after Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt, out of bondage and into freedom, and after God has given the people the commandments by which they are to live together in community, God anticipates that there will come a time when the Israelites will want a king. And so God shares some particular guidance about how to choose that king when the time comes and what makes a good king and a bad king. God says that kings should not acquire a bunch of wives, and they shouldn't build up for themselves fortunes of silver and gold. Furthermore, the king is to keep God's commandments front and center at all times, following the laws and statutes and not putting himself above his people.

Unfortunately, as we know, the future kings of Israel did not heed this wisdom.

How many of you have seen Game of Thrones? It's a bloody and violent, if captivating, drama about multiple families fighting for control of a kingdom. And manipulation and backstabbing, are the rules of the game. You may be surprised to learn, if you have not thoroughly read the Books of First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings in the Old Testament, that manipulation and backstabbing are too often the rules of the game for Israel's monarchy, as well. Despite what we might initially think when we hear passages like the one from this morning which sheds such a positive light on Solomon who says all the right things to God, not asking for wealth or power, but wisdom only so that he may rule his people well, David's line is just as guilty of this Game of Thrones type of striving for power and fortune as any other royal line.

King David had his own struggle to take the throne from Saul and his line—marrying Saul's daughter Michal and having her spy upon her father's household. The struggle for succession among his own sons gets pretty violent. Amnon, the oldest son, gets murdered by Absalom, another son,

as vengeance for the rape of a half-sister. Absalom then makes a play for the throne and raises troops to fight David's army. We heard the end of that tragic story last week in the Second Samuel reading where Absalom had fled his father's men and was riding away on a mule, when his thick, long hair got tangled in the branches of a tree, and he was left hanging there while the mule took off, right out from under him. An amusing image, if terrible, image. When David's men chase him down and find him hanging in the tree, General Joab stabs him and he dies.

In today's passage, we heard of Solomon's ascension to the throne, but that was not a peaceful transition either, despite the impression we are given of Solomon as humble and loyal. As David neared his death, and the question of succession was at the forefront, one faction lined up behind Adonijah—the oldest son after the murders of Amnon and Absalom and another faction supported Solomon, the son of Bathsheba. Bathsheba and the high priest, Zadok, go straight to David when Adonijah is out telling the people of Israel that the throne is his. They remind David, or perhaps persuade him, that he made a promise to Bathsheba that Solomon would succeed him. Through intrigue and plotting, Bathsheba gets Solomon placed on the throne. Adonijah, at first, forgiven and spared by Solomon for his actions, makes one more strategic move for the throne and is killed.

As David lay dying, he called Solomon to him to remind him that God has called the kings of Israel to be "scrupulous in their conduct and to walk before [God] faithfully with all their heart and soul." (1Kings 2:4). I am reminded of the prophet Micah's great line, "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (6:8). This is what God wants of all people, especially kings because they have such power and influence.

But despite these gracious words of David, encouraging Solomon to be the kind of man and king that God desires, he goes on to list for Solomon all of the slights and injuries done to David and names for him those he must kill to get even for those slights and injuries, therefore eliminating possible enemies in the future. That doesn't sound much to me much like the justice, mercy and humility that God requires.

But, of course, violence and striving for power is pervasive throughout the stories of these great kings of Israel. Solomon will oppress his people so badly, enslaving some of them in order to complete his ambitious building projects, that after his death, there will be a coup to try to get power from his son and heir and the kingdom. The result of that coup is that the kingdom is split into North and South with two kings.

We will only get one more week of Solomon's story and the line of David before the lectionary moves us into the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. So what do we learn from knowing these stories and by understanding and acknowledging that these are not the stories of blameless superheroes but of very human and flawed beings?

I think what we learn from the stories of these kings is that despite how sincere in their faithfulness to God they start out, despite their best intentions to be "scrupulous in their conduct and to walk before [God] faithfully with all their heart and soul," power and wealth, and the desire for more power and wealth, will always pull them in a direction away from God.

And furthermore, what we see in the Gospels—in the person of Jesus, is the very antithesis of this kind of kingship that always leaves them striving for more.

Stephanie Spellers, in her new book, *The Church Cracked Open*, explains it like this, "Jesus could have been a prince on a throne, holding power, riches, and every kind of privilege. Instead, he denied it. He let it go. . . . He consciously chose a path that assured suffering, humiliation, desolation, and finally death on a cross."

Understanding Jesus like that reminds us that we must be careful with the king language we use for him. Christians love their paintings and stained-glass windows depicting Jesus on a throne. We even have an entire Sunday in the liturgical year called Christ the King Sunday.

This is all fine and good as long as we understand what kind of king Jesus is. He is not like David and Solomon. Again, Stephanie Spellers is helpful in understanding this when she writes, “Jesus entered as he did, where he did, doing what he did, because God needed us to finally comprehend the truth: God is not a sky king who heads an empire; God is the love that gives itself away for the sake of more love. Jesus could only communicate that point by standing outside the power structures and inviting disciples to join him and discover new life with him on the margins.”

The idea of discovering new life with Jesus on the margins may just be the key to understanding the Bread of Life Discourse in John’s Gospel—the pieces of which we’ve heard for several weeks—texts that can sound repetitious and confusing and even alarming. John’s poetry is meant more for contemplation than for precise understanding, but I find in that discourse that Jesus is asking his followers to think twice about what feeds them. We have been trained to think that our hunger can be fulfilled with possessions, with power, with our abilities, our comfort, control and structures, our identities, and more. But Jesus is pointing us toward a different way. Instead of clinging to those things, we are called to release our attachments to them and to understand that the only value they have is in their usefulness to God’s movement in the world. When we finally learn to release those things, then we can fully understand that they are not the bread of life—that which sustains us...Jesus is.

So unlike the perpetual climbing that we see in the kings of old, Jesus invites us downward—to the margins. And he promises that we will be fed there—that we will discover there the bread of life. May it be so. Amen.