

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “No Direction Home: The King We Need”

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Today we finish up our series in the Book of Judges “No Direction Home.” This whole season of Lent we’ve been in this book in the Old Testament, this story of the people of Israel, after they’ve come to the Promised Land. But instead of promise, they flail around aimlessly, falling away from the Lord, seeking after what they want. That’s where the whole title of the series came from, “No Direction Home.” It’s a line out of Bob Dylan’s song “Like a Rolling Stone,” because that’s the sort of place Israel’s in. Ironically they *are* home, but they’re living nothing like it. They’re spinning wheels in the same place, and in fact worse than just staying in the same place—they’re in a downward spiral.

Every so often, God would raise up a figure called a judge—that’s why the book’s called Judges—folks like Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Samson. But even the judges would become less and less admirable, less and less effective, and all along the way, Israel gets worse and worse.

I’d like to tell you that by the end of the book, there’s some kind of resolution, something that opens Israel’s eyes, makes them see the “error of their ways,” as the saying goes. But that doesn’t really happen. In fact, the end of the Book of Judges might be one of the most disturbing sequences in the entire Bible, right up there with the events leading up to Christ’s crucifixion when you get down to it. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*The people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. So the elders of the congregation said, “What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since there are no women left in Benjamin?” And they said, “There must be heirs for the survivors of Benjamin, in order that a tribe may not be blotted out from Israel. Yet we cannot give any of our daughters to them as wives.” For the Israelites had sworn, “Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin.” So they said, “Look, the yearly festival of the LORD is taking place at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.” And they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. Then if their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.’” The Benjaminites did so; they took wives for each of them from the dancers whom they abducted. Then they went and returned to their territory, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them. So the Israelites departed from there at that time by tribes and families, and they went out from there to their own territories. In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

*Judges 21:15-25*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well if you were here looking for a light, feel good story, this might not have been the passage you expected to read in church today, but then Palm Sunday isn't really a light, feel good Sunday—at least it's not supposed to be.

In fact, the passage we read is just the tail end of a sequence of events that's just as discouraging as the end of it. The end of the story of Judges tells how the people of Israel say to the tribe of Benjamin, "Lie in wait outside the town of Shiloh, and wait for the young women to come out of the town for a ritual dance, and then just take them home for yourselves as your wives." You heard it right. The Book of Judges ends with abduction, sex trafficking.

And you might be thinking, how did it get to this? How did it get this bad? I mean, last week when we were talking about Samson, you know Samson wasn't all that great, but God used him to at least deliver Israel. Things weren't *this* bad then.

What happens is pretty disturbing, I'm afraid. It's what happens when Israel is left to its own devices.

Starts when a Levite—that's the tribe of priests, if you didn't know—starts when a Levite takes a concubine. Already we're not off to a good start. But traveling with his concubine, they come to a town of the tribe of Benjamin and spend the evening with an old man in the town.

That night, the men of the town—again, men of the tribe of Benjamin, Israelites—come to the old man and demand that he hand over the Levite who had come into town, so that they could rape him. (If you know at all with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, this may sound a bit familiar.) The old man, the host, protests, offering instead his own daughter. The men aren't placated, so the Levite grabs his concubine, throws her out of the house to the men of the town, and the men rape her throughout the night. (I told y'all this wasn't an encouraging story.)

The next morning, when the Levite goes out of the house again, he says to his concubine, absolutely coldly, "Get up, we are going." She couldn't move; she couldn't speak. Later he tells other people she was already dead, but he might've been lying. But he puts her on his donkey, and they go to his own home. Once there, he takes a knife and cuts her into twelve pieces, because that seemed like a reasonable thing to do, and then sends the pieces of her to all the tribes of Israel, telling them what had happened.

The tribes of Israel unite in opposition to the horrible thing that had happened. (In response to what the men of the town did, that is. They seemed oddly okay with that same woman being chopped up into twelve pieces.) They assemble an army and say to the tribe of Benjamin, "Hand over the men of this town." The tribe of Benjamin says no and assemble their own army. So now we have civil war. Israelite against Israelite.

Long story short, the tribe of Benjamin loses that war, with thousands being killed, so now we're in the aftermath. The rest of the tribes had vowed to denounce Benjamin and swore an oath together never to give any of their daughters in marriage to anyone in the tribe of Benjamin, effectively starving the rest of Benjamin to irrelevance.

But as it turns out, there had been one town that didn't answer the call to assemble. So the Israelites then go to that town, kill nearly everyone, sparing the young women, and take them off and give them as wives to the tribe of Benjamin, because now they were feeling sorry for Benjamin, and wiping out an entire town and abducting all the young women there to give away as wives seemed like a good idea to them.

And that brings us to this passage, the end of the Book of Judges. Turns out the young women from that other town weren't enough to give as wives to the tribe of Benjamin, so the rest of the tribes come up with this idea to let the men of Benjamin ambush the young women of the town of Shiloh when they go outside the town for a ritual dance. If they do it that way, they think, the tribes of Israel won't have broken their oath not to give their daughters as wives to Benjamin, but the tribe of Benjamin will still have wives for their men and won't die off. So that's what the men of Benjamin do, abduct all these young women of Shiloh.

Then everyone goes home.

And that's how the Book of Judges ends. If like me, you hear that story and you're appalled, that's good. You should be appalled. I honestly don't know who of all the Israelites—the Levite, the men of that first town, the tribe of Benjamin, or just the rest of Israel—I don't know who comes off worse in this whole story, because it seems nearly every action and reaction in this sequence of events is absolutely reprehensible.

Rape. Brutality. War. Sex trafficking. This is one of those parts of the Bible that doesn't get talked about very much, probably because there's not much about that is at all redeeming or encouraging. In fact, some of you may be thinking right now, well why are we reading this on Confirmation Sunday, on Palm Sunday? I thought today was supposed to be a feel-good day!

But while the Word of God as a whole speaks with hope to how the world *could be* in God's work of renewal and redemption through Christ, there are parts of it, like this part, that speak unflinchingly about how the world *is*. This is no kids' story, but neither is the world we live in. You don't have to read the headlines for very long to know that's true. Just now, sadly, heartbreakingly, the violence of Russia's occupation of Ukraine is coming even more to light as they retreat from areas around Kyiv. Rape. Brutality. War. Sex trafficking. And that's just in the headlines now. This is how the world *is*. Why? We may be asking ourselves that for a long time.

The very last sentence in the Book of Judges reads, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." All the people did what was right in their own eyes. Friends, this is what happens when everyone does what they want to do, first.

But test that, if you think it's wrong. Look at your own life, look at the lives of those you know well. Maybe you've tried things on your own. You've tried to go after what you want. Maybe you've even gotten it. Did you find satisfaction at the end of the rainbow? Even just from a monetary standpoint, once you pass a certain level of income, the more money you make, the more likely you are to suffer from depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

But still there's no shortage of cheap rate self-help, fulfill your potential knock off pseudo-wisdom out there. Maybe you believed it. The world has sold you on the lie that if you seek after your dreams, your desires, your ambitions, your goals, what you want, what is right in your eyes, then you'll be fulfilled at the end of the road. And that is a lie. I'm not saying that if you do something selfishly then you're well on your way to rape, brutality, war, and sex trafficking, but the Book of Judges isn't a story about how great humanity is. It's an unflinching look at what we look like when collectively we're left to our own devices.

And so if that's where you are this morning, I am begging you to stop buying what they're selling. When we do what's right in our own eyes, before anything else, it puts us on a road that doesn't lead to a good place. Leads us to a place where we think it's right to praise a man as king, crying Hosanna with palms in our hands one day, then call out for his death the next.

Instead, be encouraged by what we are seeing from our Confirmation Class. Because here are a group of young people who standing up and professing a faith that counterintuitively doesn't say, "Hey, look at my faith!" Instead they're saying, "Hey, don't look at me. Look at the one in whom I believe."

For the one they believe in, the one we believe in, is the one who even though he was brought out in a crown of thorns, ironically was and is indeed king, but a king that would not perpetuate the violence the world inflicted upon, a king that took upon himself the sum of all the cruelty, the vengeance, the brutality that the world could dish out and did not strike back. He took upon himself the sum of what happens when we do what is right in our own eyes, and in turn showed us a king that could lead us out of the cycle of violence and cruelty, of sin and brokenness that too often consumes us.

That is the king we need. That is the king we have. And that is the king who has given himself for you, that you may have life, and have it to the fullest.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.