

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Thou Key of David, Come: Harsh”**

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**2 Chronicles 9:31-10:15**

December 1, 2024

For the especially observant, you may already know where the title of our Advent series, “Thou Key of David, Come” comes from. We sang it earlier in the service, as it’s a line from that beautiful Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” But even then, even if you spotted the title earlier, you might still be wondering, “Well, what on earth does that mean, and why are we talking about it during Advent?” That phrase “key of David” is a deep track from the Book of Revelation, a reference to Christ as one who holds the key of David, that is, the authority, the kingly heritage of David. It’s also found in the Book of Isaiah in some words of hope and longing for the Lord’s Messiah, a coming king, God’s anointed agent. In other words, when we sing, “O Come, Thou Key of David, Come,” we are joining with the hope and longing of Israel for one who would come to restore and fulfill, despite all the disappointments and mess and pain pointing to the contrary, hope for the coming of Jesus, as the Christ, the Messiah, the King.

And in that kingly longing, what we’ll look at in particular is the story of another king, one from the Old Testament, a king named Rehoboam. We’ll get to know him shortly, but before we do, the reason I trust Scripture might speak powerfully through this story of a bad king’s failures is in all the many ways it points to how the true king and our hope for him might still speak to us. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, 2 Chronicles 9:31-10:15.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

God of Hope and Mercy, we thank you for the blessing of your Word and for the story of your people, how they stumble, how they step forward, and how you draw them in hope for your deliverance. By your Spirit, O God, give us hearts to hope anew, and to see through the disappointments and pale imitations we might place around ourselves, seeking first the hope in your Son. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Father Alfred Delp, writing in his prison cell in late 1944, penned the words, “The harshness and coldness of life have hit us with a previously unimaginable force.... Is the world more beautiful and life healthier because of that first Christmas?” More about Father Alfred later,

but for now, I was struck by those reflections on Advent and hope in the face of the harshness of reality.

This king we read about, Rehoboam, was a harsh king. You may not be as familiar with his story, but long story short, when the kingdom of Israel splits, he's the one holding the bag. Is he solely responsible? No. But he didn't help it, in fact, just from what we read today, he did a lot to precipitate it.

You may be more familiar with his dad and granddad, who are named Solomon and David, respectively. David being the same David who slew Goliath, a man after God's own heart, a king who earnestly sought to be faithful to God in his rule, and as a result was blessed, not without some failings to be sure, but blessed with a long fruitful reign.

Then his son Solomon continued in that reign, and though his rule was much more checked when it came to faithfulness to God, he was famously wise, and the stature of the kingdom of Israel increased even more. The kingdom's boundaries expanded; its wealth increased; its standing in the world more respected.

Solomon dies, so his son Rehoboam becomes king. He takes steps to fortify his authority and legitimacy, going so far as to be crowned king not in Jerusalem the capital but in a city called Shechem in the north. See trouble was brewing, and the northern tribes were growing suspicious of this dynasty under David's line, so to curry favor with them, he opts to be crowned in a northern city. This would be like if Abraham Lincoln, in order to mollify some of the Southern states as the threat of war was brewing, chose to be inaugurated as President in the Southern city of Richmond rather than Washington. The fact that he's even considering it shows that something's the matter.

Maybe that could've been a shrewd move if things had gone well, but things do not go well. He goes to Shechem and meets with a man named Jeroboam, along with other northern leaders—yes there's a Rehoboam and a Jeroboam. Jeroboam is something of a folk hero among these northern tribes. He had been high up in King Solomon's government, put in charge of the forced labor for some of Solomon's public works. (Yes, wise king Solomon conscripted forced labor from among his own people, in particular from among these northern tribes. You can see why there was trouble brewing.) But for one reason or another, presumably because Jeroboam was popular and perceived as a threat to Solomon, he had to flee. Now, with Solomon's death, this folk hero comes back and is advocating for his people to the new king.

Jeroboam and the leaders of these northern tribes say to Rehoboam, "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you." Rehoboam says, let me think about it.

Imagine this from Rehoboam's perspective. He thinks he's accommodating them already. He's insecure in his standing as the new king. He's standing in his father's shadow. He's also probably suspicious and wary of being taken advantage of. So when he takes counsel with some of his father's advisors, who tell him, show kindness here and you'll have their allegiance, he rejects it. Instead, he listens to his contemporaries, his friends, who tell him, "Be harsh, be even harsher, double down on exerting your authority. Get them in line."

So he meets again with Jeroboam and the leaders of the northern tribes and tells them, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions."

What will happen next, which we'll get to next week, is kind of predictable.

All of us can imagine a Rehoboam, I think. A harsh leader or person of authority. Could be a boss, an elected official, a coach, a parent. This is not to paint with too broad a brush; there can be strictness and discipline that can be constructive and beneficial, but I don't think any of us have to imagine too long someone in our lives, someone in a place of authority who exerts that authority harshly not out of concern for those they lead but rather like Rehoboam, out of insecurity, out of pride, out of protecting themselves and protecting the very authority they wield.

Whether it's world history or personal history, history is sadly filled with too many people like that, those who place a heavy yoke upon those they presume to lead, to hold authority over. Maybe some of us here are flinching because at some level we feel convicted that we fall into that category, that we can be harsh, needlessly harsh. We might tell ourselves it's strictness for a constructive reason, but is that the truth or is that just what we tell ourselves?

And then there are those of us who bear it. One way or another, we've felt the heavy yoke of harshness, of insecure harshness. Could be at the hands of an insecure authority, could be a more general harsh yoke within our lives. What burdens do you bear this very day? What burdens feel like they're too much, too much for you, too much for your family, too much for your workplace? Do you catch yourself asking, is it supposed to be this way? Is this the way it has to be?

The other passage we read from the Gospel of Matthew are these words of Christ. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

One of the most powerful insights I've heard about those words of our Lord is that the yoke Christ is speaking of is not necessarily a single one, as in a single yoke placed upon a single animal, but rather a dual one, placed upon two animals who then pull at the same time. Think

about what that might mean. Because when I hear, “My burden is light,” the skeptical side of me shouts out, “Oh, just magically everything is okay now?” But that’s not what it’s saying. The burden is still there. The world is still harsh. But Christ carries it with you. Christ carries it for you.

What a difference that makes. On one hand, we have this king, Rehoboam who says, “I’ll make your lives, your yokes even harsher as a sign of my power,” and then on the other, we have another king who says, “Let me show you what power really looks like, what authority really entails” and carries the burden with us, for us.

Father Alfred Delp, the same guy from the beginning, a Catholic priest, was imprisoned in Nazi Germany for involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. But during his six months in prison before sadly his execution in early 1945, he was able to smuggle out of prison a series of letters and reflections. And due to the time of year in which he wrote, much of that writing focused on the seasons of Advent and Christmas.

In what was a profound understatement, he wrote in December of 1944 from his prison cell, “This year the temptations toward a picturesque Christmas are probably reduced.”

We have that idea in mind too. Might look different from person to person, but we have it, that picturesque Christmas, the tree, the jingle bells, the warm fire, the carols, family and friends, you name it. And those things can be nice. But for each of us, it seems, there’s some burden we carry into this season, and we fool ourselves into thinking, “This does not belong. Christmas cannot be about burdens, about harshness.” And we feel almost ashamed that something is amiss during what should be a season of joy.

But really that burden you carry, that heavy yoke is a true a sign of the hope of Christmas as I can think of. Not because it’s heavy, not because you might be languishing, truly suffering underneath it, not because there’s some magic spell to make it all go away, but because the hope of this season, the good news, is that one is coming anew whose yoke is easy, who carries it with us, who carries it for us.

“Is the world more beautiful and life healthier because of that first Christmas?” Father Delp wrote from his prison cell. Those weren’t empty words, pie in the sky meditations on how nice things are. This is from the pit, and yet reflects this gospel of the God who came, who lived, who walked, who died, who gave himself for us, and who rose again that we might live too.

And hope is there for you this season, no matter the yoke you carry.

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