

Thou Key of David, Come: Divisive

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2 Chronicles 10:16-11:4

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We continue in this Advent series “Thou Key of David, Come.” If you were with us last week, you’ll remember that phrase is a line from the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” which we just sang a little bit ago. It refers to the longing in Israel’s history, and by extension to the hope of this season, for a Messiah, a Savior, one of David’s kingly line, one who would restore and deliver the people of God.

Last week we started a look at the story of one of Israel’s failed kings, someone named Rehoboam, David’s grandson in fact, whose insecurity and harshness set the stage for the split of the kingdom of Israel. And like a mentioned last week, your first reaction to hearing about Rehoboam might have been, “Who? And why are we hearing about him?” And admittedly, his story is a bit off the beaten path in Scripture and definitely off the beaten path around Advent and Christmas, but as we consider the failures of this king, may they point us to the king that we hope for, that we wait for, the king who came and who is coming again. Let’s go to God’s Word together. 2 Chronicles 10:16-11:4.

*When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king,
“What share do we have in David?*

We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.

Each of you to your tents, O Israel!

Look now to your own house, O David.”

So all Israel departed to their tents. But Rehoboam reigned over the people of Israel who were living in the cities of Judah. When King Rehoboam sent Hadoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, the people of Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam hurriedly mounted his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

When Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled one hundred eighty thousand chosen troops of the house of Judah and Benjamin to fight against Israel, to restore the kingdom to Rehoboam. But the word of the Lord came to Shemaiah the man of God: “Say to King Rehoboam of Judah, son of Solomon, and to all Israel in Judah and Benjamin: Thus says the Lord: You shall not go up or fight against your kindred. Let everyone return home, for this thing is from me.” So they heeded the word of the Lord and turned back from the expedition against Jeroboam.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Healing and Grace, we pray for your provision this day, when we recognize there is so much that weighs upon us. We pray that by your Word we would hear the promise of wholeness, the hope of healing. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

A few years later when he toiled in his prison cell, writing secret reflections on Advent and Christmas, Father Alfred Delp surely remembered some the conversations he had had with his friends, gathered at a country estate in what is now southwestern Poland. He had been invited there by his superior in the Jesuit order to take part in what became known as the Kreisau Circle, a group of about twenty-five religious, military, and political

leaders in Nazi Germany. Though they weren't directly a resistance group, there was certainly some overlap with other groups that did actively resist Hitler's regime. Rather, this group dedicated themselves to envisioning a society for their country that looked decidedly different from what they were witnessing around them in the Nazi regime.

No doubt that vision, that hope came back to Alfred Delp when he was sentenced to death for treason.

We come to the story of Rehoboam and the kingdom of Israel at the point of treason, mutiny, succession, resistance, nearly civil war, whatever label you want to put on it. If you were with us last week, you'll remember that the new king Rehoboam, after the death of his father Solomon, saw fit to double down on a harsh approach to the northern tribes of Israel after they plead with him to relent, to show kindness. You probably could have predicted their response.

Starting in v. 16: "When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king, 'What share do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. Each of you to your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, O David.'" Hard to blame them for what these northern tribes said. This new king seemed to see them like his father Solomon did: as fodder and forced labor for his public works and palaces, as subjects whose sole purpose was to do his bidding. He had demonstrated little concern for their well-being, so why should they have a stake in his?

"So all Israel departed to their tents," it continues. That statement there can kind of slip by under the radar. It doesn't just mean they went back to their literal tents in a campsite. It means that they went to their own homes, their own dwellings, their own lands, that is to say, they did not share one, a land, a home, with the king anymore.

This is a huge deal. This king and his actions have stoked division in the kingdom of Israel, a kingdom that had been called to bear witness to the goodness and faithfulness of God within the world. And now it was splitting apart.

Rehoboam tried to get it back together. He was going to lose more than half his kingdom lying down. He exerts his rule over the cities still within the territory of his particular tribe Judah, and then he sends his taskmaster to represent him to these northern tribes. To what end? To show them who's boss? To bring them back under his thumb? I couldn't tell you. Think about it. Their biggest concern was being subjected to continued, harsh forced labor, and so in all of the king's wisdom, he sends the person who is in charge of all the forced labor. What could go wrong?

Well, they stone him to death. And with that assault, the king runs. He gets in his chariot and flees back to Jerusalem, and ends up trying to raise an army of nearly two hundred thousand troops to invade the north and bring it back under his thumb. That doesn't work either, which we'll get to in a minute, but as it says in v. 19, "So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day."

If you ever remember hearing about the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Israel to the north, Judah to the south, or even later on of Samaritans and Jews, a divided land that had been given to the covenant people of God, a dynamic serving as a backdrop for much of the prophets and Israel's history, this is how that happened: an insecure king trying in vain to keep a kingdom together by force and fear, only to stoke division instead.

The ramifications of this king's failure are felt deeply throughout the pages of Scripture.

Division has a way of doing that, doesn't it? When something breaks, something that was supposed to stay together, supposed to represent unity and resilience, but then doesn't, it can be felt deeply.

Think of the broken, divided things in your life. We all have them. A broken friendship, a broken professional partnership, a broken team, a broken church; a broken relationship, a broken family, a broken marriage. The impact of those divisions can be felt for years, decades, centuries, and the scars don't often heal over cleanly.

And it's in seasons like this, like Advent, like Christmas, that we perhaps feel those losses, that breaking apart even more. Why? Well because it's supposed to be a season of harmony, of joy, of everyone coming together, right? That's what we think we're supposed to feel all the time, at least, and when it's not, the broken parts of ourselves, of our lives, our relationships, cut a bit deeper, don't they?

It can become nearly all-consuming, to the point that it's hard for us to envision anything else. Things are shattered, and that's just how it is.

If you've been a part of this church for a little while, you may remember my sharing before my call-it ambivalence toward the Christmas season, culturally. Not because there shouldn't be and isn't joy in the season anticipating Christ, because there should be, and there is, and I feel it. But because the way I sense that joy, that happiness, that Christmas cheer being expressed more often than not is in, as far as I see it, emptier, more like putting on a happy face. Why? Well because the calendar says it's a certain month.

But the hope of this season, the hope of Christ, the hope of Advent isn't an empty cheer, it's a glimpse of light in our darkest hour. When things feel most hopeless, *that* is precisely the moment into which Christ speaks.

Father Aldred Delp, in his darkest hour, no doubt remembered his friends in the Kreisau Circle, that group dedicated to envisioning a world beyond the Third Reich. He perhaps had them in mind when he wrote from his prison cell, "We need people who are moved by the horrific calamities and emerge from them with the knowledge that those who look to the Lord will be preserved by him, even if they are hounded from the earth."

Even when hope seems lost, there are those who are stirred, awakened to faith, as he writes elsewhere, "The shaking, the awakening: with these, life merely begins to become capable of Advent. It is precisely in the severity...in the helplessness...in the wretchedness...that the golden threads running between heaven and earth during this season reach us; the threads that give the world a hint of the abundance to which it is called."

I think we caught a glimpse of such people in this passage today. Do you remember what happened when Rehoboam went back to Jerusalem? He raised an army, 180,000 troops, to invade the north, war, violence. But then what happened? God sends a prophet, who speaks to the king and to the people, "You shall not go up or fight against your kindred. Let everyone return home, for this thing is from me." And then everyone goes home.

In other instances of a prophet's intervention, the king himself might relent and might directly order his army to stand down, to go home. But it doesn't tell us that. It's actually kind of unclear just who initiated the laying down of arms. Did this insecure, vindictive king Rehoboam have a change of heart and say, "Stand down," or did the people, shaken, awoken to the senselessness of this thing, feel stirred to take a step for peace, for healing? It doesn't really say, but I like to think that then on the cusp of civil war, there were those who, without even knowing exactly what they were hoping for, seized at a glimpse of something better, the hope for a king who would heal rather than divide, who would stoke faith rather than fear, who would step into harm's way for them rather than place them there for his own gain.

It certainly didn't bring about the magical healing of all things between Israel and Judah. It certainly didn't suddenly make Rehoboam this wise, faithful, compassionate king—he has a bit of a turnaround, which we'll see next week, but anyway. It certainly didn't restore the vision for this kingdom of the Lord as a witness to the world through his covenant people. But still here, on the cusp of further violence, in the face of fresh division, there was a people who said, we're going to hope for peace, for healing.

Do you know anyone like that? Could you be someone like that? Hoping against hope, like the people of Judah on the cusp of civil war, or like Alfred Delp in his prison cell, in the face of division and whatever broken, shattered parts of your life you're thinking of right now, could there be a stirring in you to take a step for peace in the hopes that healing might come one day?

If you sense even an inkling of that within yourself, maybe the Spirit's at work within you, right now. And if so, may you hear the hope of the gospel of Christ, the hope that we celebrate in this season, that on one hand we see a king here in Rehoboam who would divide, we look to another king who would heal, that on one hand we see a king who would shed his own people's blood, we look to another king who gives up his own, that on one hand we see a king whose people say they have no share with him, we look to another king who says "My share is with you," that on one hand we see a king who runs away, we look to another king who plunges into the mess, into our mess, and redeems it.

May you take a step for peace, whatever that step might be, in the hope that that king has come and is coming anew.

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