

“From Above and Below”

1 Kings 12 (select verses)

James 3:13-18

Intro: Before we hear the Old Testament scripture this morning, I want to give you a bit of the back story. Although Solomon had been a good and wise king for most of his reign, near the end he married a lot of foreign women. He built sanctuaries to their gods and turned his heart to these other gods. The Lord was angry and told Solomon that the kingdom would be torn from the hand of his son. Now, awhile back, Solomon had had a young man who worked for him who did an outstanding job named Jeroboam. Jeroboam was such a good builder that Solomon made him an official in charge of all the laborers from the twelve tribes. Around the time that Solomon learned that his son would lose the kingdom, Jeroboam learned that God was giving him ten tribes to rule. God urged Jeroboam to be faithful and righteous. Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam so that Solomon’s son Rehoboam could keep the whole kingdom, but Jeroboam fled to Egypt. Listen now for the Spirit is speaking to the church.

Around 1858, two families moved to a small town in California. When the Civil War started, the Frost family fought for the Confederates and the Coates family fought for the Union. From the time they met, they had had an uneasy relationship, to say the least. The conflict of the parents was echoed by their children. The schoolboys got into a fistfight; the teacher punished both. Their parents complained (surely one of the boys was at fault!). One parent eventually agreed with the teacher and the other didn’t. One parent vowed to get the teacher fired and make sure that everyone on the school board lost their positions. The other vowed to protect the teacher and get the school board re-elected.

Anger, outbursts, and taunting increased. A few years later came another election day. Many in the community were gathered around, including the Frosts and the Coates. One member picked a fight with another member and then the families joined in. Fifteen seconds passed and six people lost their lives. After the violence ended, many from both families mourned their dead together and made peace with one another.

The feud was over, but Elijah Frost, who had lost his father, became a horse thief. He ended up in prison. When he got out, he joined a violent gang and... let's just say that it didn't end well for him. The Frosts kept getting swept up in heavy drinking and threats and violence with one another. Many lost their lives. This continued until 1885 – twenty years after all this had begun.

So often, when we think of the Civil War, we call it a war of “brother against brother.” Passionately held convictions tore families and communities apart as they marched into battle. The scars of that schism didn't disappear overnight. Children learn what is right and wrong from their parents; who to distrust, who to hate, when to fight. Maybe that's what happened to the Frosts. They learned to fight, but they didn't learn how to stop. It was said that, though the fight between the families had finished, “the curse of the blood-feud” hung over the Frosts.

What these families experienced mirrors some of the dynamics of domestic violence. When violence finds its place in the home, its effect ripples out to each member of the family. Recently, there's been research that suggests that having adverse childhood experiences can lead to changes in how your brain develops, the way your genes express themselves, the diseases you get later in life, what your lifespan will be, how easily you get to that fight-or-flight stage, how big your emotional reactions are, how likely you are to interpret situations as dangerous.

When biology and environment conspire to steer you down an impossible road, what can you do? In our scripture from 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam is the son of King Solomon. He's the heir apparent to the throne. But the people know Jeroboam. He's seen how hard their labor is. You might remember another time that the Hebrew complained about the hard labor they had to do – when they were slaves in Egypt. With Jeroboam as their champion, they tell Rehoboam that they've been working so hard for Solomon that they feel like their trapped in Egypt again. The people aren't asking for a raise or demanding that they be released from a responsibility to work for the good of the kingdom. They just want the workload to be a little less.

So, the elders tell Rehoboam to be a servant leader, to speak good words to the people. His buddies that he grew up with tell him to outdo his father in demands. He's at this crucial moment – like there's an angel and a devil on his shoulders whispering in his ears. What does it mean to be king? What does it mean to be a leader, to be respected, to be a man? He looked at his father's kingdom and he learned the wrong lesson. It must be force; it must be fear – that is where the real power is.

Rehoboam chose to be Pharaoh, probably with some arrogance that the extra workload would mean more money, more prestige, more monuments to his ambition. Then the people made their choice. Strengthened by Jeroboam's support, a leader who was willing to stand by them, who understood them, the people said “no.” They became the Kingdom of Israel and Rehoboam was left with one tribe only – the Kingdom of Judah.

What could be more absolute than the power of a king? What could feel more absolute than the power and destructive influence of an abuser? And yet... the Coates family made a different choice than the Frost family. As they wept together, they chose to learn how to live in peace – no matter how hard that would be; no matter how many times they messed up.

Living in a house of violence, whoever you are, whatever age you are – it changes you. What you face at home tends to become what you see as normal and it's hard to hold on to another way to look at life, to understand what healthy family relationships are. Add to that the way that violence and trauma change your brain chemistry and development... Well, it must really be hopeless. What else is there?

And yet... sometimes you come to a moment where you realize that you *can* make a new choice. You can take a chance. Is life basically jealous and bitter? Filled with people motivated by selfish ambition? Lying, cruel, jealous, evil? James tells us that if that's the way things are, life will be a mess. But could there be wisdom from heaven? Could there be strength in being peaceful and gentle, merciful, kind, fair, honest? That is the wisdom that comes from above. That is a life that is true and real and worth pursuing. Not just that – every time we make peace, it's like we're planting a seed. And that seed grows into a harvest of justice.

Rehoboam could have made peace, but he chose violence. The ten tribes of Israel could have stayed in the kingdom, but they let their eyes be opened. Solomon's building projects were done. The Temple was finished. The city looked great. Their hard labor should have been done, too. They found peace in leaving.

Leaving can be the hardest thing to do. The life that you have known; the way you've understood how the world works for days, for years, for a lifetime. This wisdom from below that masquerades as wisdom – it might be destructive and degrading – but even a life under violence has its predictable rhythms. It is an awful cycle, but it's pretty consistent.

When someone else is so controlling, so willing to inflict harm, how could you ever be safe to leave? How could you dare to imagine a life that is free? It usually takes a number of times to leave; it takes a lot of support, but it is possible. Just as we can be changed by violence,

so, too, can we be changed by love, by compassion, by comfort, by peace, by gentleness, by mercy. Our minds and hearts are more flexible than we fear. The wisdom of love and peace that comes from above is for all of us. May God teach us all to believe in it, to live by it, and to support others in seeking it. Amen.

Sources

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