

“God Works Through: Diplomats of God’s Way”

Matthew 2:13-15

2 Kings 11-12 (Select Verses)

Before I read the second scripture lesson this morning, I must confess to you all that this is one of the periods in biblical history that I know the least about. It’s pretty easy in the beginning with the United Kingdom: first Saul is king, then David, then Solomon. But after that, once we have the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel in the north, things get fuzzy really fast. Between Saul’s coronation and the days when the last of Judah was conquered by Babylon and sent into exile, about 433 years passed and they had 42 kings and 1 illegitimate queen. That’s a lot of people to keep track of, particularly when a lot of them have very similar sounding names. So, to help us stay on track, we have a handy-dandy family tree insert.

The background of our story is that several kings of Judah have died pretty quickly one right after the other. Jehoshaphat – who never jumped in the Bible, by the way – Jehoshaphat was a mostly good king who followed the ways of the Lord. But he thought it would be good to strengthen ties with the northern kingdom – the kingdom of Israel – by seeking a marriage between his son Jehoram and their daughter Athaliah. Now, Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. And they were wicked rulers – the Bible even calls Ahab “the troubler of Israel” and “more evil than all the kings before him.” To secure political alliances with the Phoenicians, Ahab had married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre who was a HUGE, MASSIVE, ENTHUSIASTIC worshipper of Baal and Ashteroth. In her culture, the queen was deeply involved in overseeing religious ritual and practice so she insisted that Ahab build a temple and an altar for Baal. She tried to convert the entire kingdom of Israel to Baal worship and rounded

up and slaughtered all the prophets of the Lord that she could get her hands on. Ahab was very much influenced by her.

Enter Athaliah: in every way, she was her mother's daughter. In her marriage to Jehoram, the family secured influence over the kingdom of Judah, too. When Jehoram died because of wounds he received in battle, their son Ahaziah became the 6th king of Judah. Athaliah and her family convinced him to join the northern kingdom in their battle against the Arameans. At this time, the prophet Elisha sent a student to anoint a new king in Israel – a king who would follow God's ways and remove the worship of Baal from the land. That man was called Jehu (he's not in your chart). With great violence, he called the northerners together to clean house and slew all of the family of Ahab and Jezebel– this included killing Athaliah's son Ahaziah.

This is where our story begins: Athaliah sees the destruction of her family and the challenge to her religion, Jehosheba (our main focus) is her child who is married to Jehoiada, the High Priest of the Lord God. And there are still many offspring of Ahaziah who have a legitimate claim to the throne. Hear now the word of the Lord.

Athaliah wanted power and control. She wanted it so badly that she was willing to murder her own grandchildren to get it. And there is Jehosheba, King Jehoram's daughter. It is possible that Athaliah wasn't her mother – that the king had taken multiple wives or that Athaliah was more like her wicked stepmother. Still, here is a woman whose family's influence has been severely challenged in recent days and if she couldn't rely on the strength of the north to bolster her, then she's going to make sure to secure control the only way she knows how – by killing anyone who might dare to challenge her reign. She sets about to destroy all the royal

family – including any other children of hers or other wives, including her own grandchildren. It's hard for us to even imagine someone that cold-hearted and ruthless.

And who can stand up to this terror of a tyrant? A commander? A warrior? A mighty prophet? No – it's this woman Jehosheba. We know almost nothing about her. Suddenly, she's just there. Maybe Athaliah never gave her much notice. She married the high priest, she had her own life now. Though there is some debate, it seems likely that the high priest was the only one who made his home in the temple. They lived their lives in a house of worship and praised the one true God. And when the commentaries tell this story, they so often say Jehoiada (the high priest) and his wife saved the infant who would be king. Then they go on and on to talk about everything that the high priest Jehoiada did.

But that's not what the Bible says – it says that Jehosheba took her nephew Joash, that she stole him away from among the king's children who were about to be killed. Surely Athaliah would notice if all of the children were gone, but maybe, just maybe, Jehosheba could save this innocent infant. She found a nurse for him and hid them away in the Temple while Athaliah wielded the throne as she saw fit.

We've included the conclusion to the story in the scripture reading so that you can hear about Athaliah's comeuppance and the restoration of a rightful King of Judah – a king in David's line, who spent most of his life leading in goodness and obedience to God's way. But what we're really focusing on this morning is the extraordinary bravery of this woman Jehosheba. She risked everything to watch out for the helpless.

When we think about powerful women standing up against tyrants who slaughter innocents, we usually think of Moses's mother setting him in a basket of reeds and praying for his life and his safety. We often forget that Jesus himself faced a similar threat from Herod.

Herod heard that a king of the Jews would be born and ordered all of the children in and around Bethlehem 2 years old and younger to be killed so that his own reign would be protected. Herod realized that he had been tricked by the wise men and he didn't want to take any chances when it came to power.

Moses's mother, Jehosheba, Joseph and Mary saw that the life of this little one mattered. I'm certainly not saying that Moses is the same as baby Joash is the same as Jesus, but we have this repeated theme in scripture that innocent lives matter to us as faithful people because they absolutely matter to God. You may never hear the name Joash ever again, but he was part of the line that carried God's promise into the future. And so it is with each innocent one who gets caught up in the power plays of people so far away from them. God gave us all life and we are called to remember and cherish that gift in each one that we hold in our arms, each one whose tears we dry, each one who we cheer on.

Because the weight of the sorrows of the world seems impossible. No matter what we do there will always be more suffering, right? And who am I – who are you – among all the people on earth that we could possibly make a difference? If you ask Jehosheba, I bet she would tell you that she wasn't really anybody either, but she could save that one. She could help him grow in faith and in love. She could look around at where she is and step in, trusting that God is working in our world.

As I was meditating on these passages the past few weeks, I couldn't help but think of the folks in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France during the Nazi era (I apologize for my poor pronunciation). It is estimated that they saved 3,000-5,000 Jewish children from death by the Nazis. They had these fiery leaders, like the pastor André Trocmé. He met with other local pastors to share news and information about where and when the fleeing Jews would be arriving.

He led Bible study groups about caring for the stranger in your midst. He preached about resisting the Nazis and rallied everyone together so that he could to help save their innocent lives. The expression most often used to describe this small town is: “a conspiracy of goodness.” People didn’t talk about who they were taking in or where they came from. It was a quiet nod, undiscussed among the people, but a resistance that so many of them risked their lives for.

We might wonder – how did it happen that this whole community could organize so well? How did it happen that they got gendarmes on their side who were forced to try to round up Jews for death, but instead walked down the street slowly and calling out loudly, “we’re here to arrest the Jews” so that people had a chance to hide? These weren’t special, superhuman saints. They were regular people with a history of their own. In the region of France where they lived, 95% of people were protestant. They were descended from Huguenots who were Reformed Protestants that had been bitterly persecuted by the Catholics in power. Wars were fought, protestant’s political and civil rights were restricted, they were violently pursued and given the choice to flee or convert. Even though this was several hundred years before their day, the people of le Chambon held the memory of what it meant to be a persecuted people, a hunted people. They could not turn away from these vulnerable children because they knew that their ancestors were just like them. And because of their empathy and compassion, 80% of French Jewish children survived the Holocaust.

And the average person who aided this massive rescue endeavor didn’t have fancy, elaborate theological responses to explain what they had done. They said things like, “How could you call us good?” “We were doing what had to be done.” Their town was a sort of a retreat out to the country from the big city so they generally had lots of out of town guests. Emma Hértier

answered the question of why she and her husband hid the children by saying, “I don’t know; because we were used to it.”

Who are these people who can stand up for what they believe in – who can save a life, who can serve the Lord? Who in our day can be Jehosheba, Mary, Joseph, Moses’s mother? Jimmy Buffet once quipped, “We are the people our parents warned us about.” This morning we can proclaim that we are the people that the scriptures warned us about. We are the people who the world needs. We are the people who can love and serve the Lord with who we are, what we have, and what we can do in our own time and place. So let us be inspired by these brave stories of the past and then let us be bold to add our voices to theirs, to bravely lift the hand of the helpless and shout out for the voiceless. As we follow God’s holy way, we can gladly affirm that nothing is impossible with our God. Amen.