



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
In the City of New York

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Sunday, September 9, 2012
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

on
1 Kings 12.21-33

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WHY DO CHRISTIANS READ THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Why do Christians read the Old Testament? What does the Old Testament lesson we heard earlier have to do with Christianity? Does it have anything to do with Christianity? It's a curious reading. It comes from one of the books of history found in the bible, the First Book of the Kings. It is the story of a great falling out within the nation and the kingdom of Israel. To put it in context, let's look back a little bit.

After the Israelites leave Moses behind and enter the land that God had promised them there followed an age of adjustment. The people had to settle the land before they could settle down to living in it. During this time, there was nothing that we would recognize as a formal, organized government. The difficulties the Israelites faced were met under the leadership of localized judges. Samuel was the last of these Judges. Now God had gone to a lot of trouble to set the Israelites apart from the other nations and he had a purpose in mind when he did so. He would be their God and they would be his people and they would be a light that would enlighten all the other nations to the glory of his name.

However, in Samuel's lifetime a national consciousness began to emerge and something began to stir within the people. They wanted to be like the other nations that surrounded them; they wanted a king and a central authority. Samuel resisted, but God told him two things. The first was to not be hurt by the people's desire for a king; the people were not rejecting Samuel, they were rejecting God. And the second thing he told Samuel was to give the people what they wanted, but to tell them beforehand what it was going to be like to have rejected the Lord. Nonetheless, the people insisted on an earthly king and they received Saul.

Saul, well what can we say about Saul very quickly. He had a large task before him. He became king of a nation that had never had a government and was constantly at war with its neighbors to establish control over its land. And when Saul died, things were still fragmented and unsettled. There have been worse kings than Saul but there have been better.

Now it was on a field of battle with the Philistines that a young shepherd boy named David emerged on the scene. David proved so popular, and able, that he quickly replaced Saul in the hearts of the people. Saul was their king, but they loved David. He became a national hero and when Saul died, David was the natural choice for king for two reasons. The first was that the people wanted him. The more important of the two reasons was that God had chosen him.

So David became king and is able to do what Saul had never been able to do. Jerusalem, a town on their new turf that the Israelites had never been able to win from Canaanite control was won. David makes it this capital. If Abraham was the father of the nation and Moses was its law-giver, David became its quintessential king. In his hands, the disorganized and tribal fragments that Saul left behind became a well-established nation.

Now David was not perfect. In his day he committed grave sins: his affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, being two among others. But in his sinfulness David never forgot the remedy. He always returned to the Lord and sought his forgiveness. David's psalms give expression to the profound mercy David received at God's hand. This illustrates a quality in David that set him apart from every Israelite king that would ever follow. David had a single-minded devotion to God. In good times and in bad, in righteousness and in sin, David never forgot God. And in David, God found a worthy servant such that he promised that a son of David would be king forever.

When he died, David left his son and heir Solomon a strong nation. Solomon, by his request to God received a double portion of wisdom over what David possessed. And that request pleased God and Solomon made a good beginning. He built the temple in Jerusalem. But wisdom divorced from single-minded devotion to God is a temptress. And Solomon began to falter. He chased after the many gods of his many foreign wives. He built altars and high places to them. The people began to bypass the temple on their way out the city gates to worship these idols. Solomon had been warned in a dream what would happen if he abandoned God. God said he would abandon the kingdom and it would fall apart.

And that brings us to our reading tonight; the great falling out between ten tribes of Israel in the north and two in the south. Solomon is dead. The two principle players are Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Rehoboam was King Solomon's son and heir. When Solomon died, Rehoboam became king over Israel and inherited a kingdom wealthier and more powerful than it had ever been. But all that wealth had been accumulated through heavy taxation under Solomon. When representatives from the ten tribes up north came down to beseech the new king to ease the tax burden, Rehoboam said, "My little pinky is as big as my father's loins. You won't know what taxation is until you've been taxed by me." The tribesmen leave Rehoboam and go straight into rebellion, they appoint one of Solomon's old government ministers, Jeroboam, as their king and establish the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Rehoboam remains in Jerusalem and retains hold over the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah.

Since the northern tribes are now cut off from Jerusalem and Jeroboam doesn't want his people going down there, he has a problem on his hands. Jerusalem has the temple, the center of Jewish worship. Where will the northern tribes worship? Jeroboam makes two calves of gold and says to the people, "Since it's too much trouble to go down to Jerusalem....Behold these two gold calves. These are the gods that brought you up out of bondage in Egypt. Stay up north and worship them." And even more than Solomon's chasing after other gods, this begins a great run of apostasy that will spiral down until the northern kingdom is invaded by the Assyrians and is erased from the face of the earth. Thus the ten lost tribes of Israel; they've never been heard of since. The southern kingdom fares better, but not by much. The south is overrun by the Babylonians; Jerusalem is destroyed; the temple is destroyed and the people are taken away to live in a foreign land; thus the Babylonian captivity. But they are not completely destroyed.

And all of this history leads to a simple but serious theological dilemma. And here is where we begin to answer my original question: why do Christians read the Old Testament? What does all this history have to do with Christianity? To begin with, the history books of the bible are as much theological histories as they are chronological histories. When the temple is gone; when the nation is gone; when there is no king, how is God going to keep his promises to David regarding a king and kingdom that will never end? This is not a question of history, this is a theological question? It would be almost 500 chronological years before the world would get the answer to that question, though the Jews always lived in expectation of the answer. How does God keep his promises? Through Jesus Christ; the son of David, born of a

virgin whose kingdom is not of this world, but whose kingdom has broken into this world in an unexpected way. Jesus Christ is the king the Old Testament wanted all along. And to this day that king calls on all of the divided kingdoms and all the divided selves of the world to come to him and to have all that division and fragmentation and unsettledness made whole, healed and restored under his most gracious rule.