June 24/25 2017 Rev. Amy Haines

2 Kings 22:1-3,8-13; 23:1-3 Josiah: A Call to Revival Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

How many of you have an 8 year-old in your family right now? Can you imagine that child in charge of the country? How many of you have a 16 year-old in your family right now? Are they trying to change the world, or just trying to change the house rules now that they are old enough to drive? How many of you can remember what it was like to be 26 years-old? Had you settled into a routine of life by then, or were you still trying to figure out what to do with your life?

On this weekend when we send forth our church’s teenagers into mission and ministry in Michigan, our unlikely hero of the Bible is a child himself. Josiah became king of Judah at age 8, intentionally began to seek God when he was sixteen, and sought to revive his people and his nation at age 26.

His story first reminds us that we are never too young to begin to make a difference in the world around us, beginning with our own lives, if we seek the Lord and seek to live by faith.

Go back far enough in his lineage and his ancestor Sarah will tell you we are also never too old to continue to make a difference in the world around us, if we follow where God leads.

How many of you will admit, however, that before today you had no idea that Josiah ever existed?

Rolf Jacobson once shared that in his own memory as a preacher’s kid, with a dad who preached often on the Old Testament, he could not recall knowing this story or ever hearing a sermon on it as a child. He then asked two of his old bible teachers, both in their 80s, one a seminary professor and another an author and teacher, if they had ever heard a sermon preached on Josiah. In their combined 169 years they both agreed that they had not.

--adapted from Rolf Jacobson 11-27-11 workingpreacher.org

So be assured, you are not alone.

How many people struggle nowadays to even know where John 3:16 is from, let alone what it says. How many Christians believe that the statement, “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is in the Bible. (By the way, it is not.) Some even believe that Sodom and Gomorra were like Romeo and Juliet, two lovers whose romance went wrong, rather than two cities God destroyed for their wicked ways.

If we are honest today about what bible stories and characters we don’t know, how ironic it is to now ponder Josiah’s story, from a time in history when the people of God then also did not know their own faith history, and may have had no idea that much of the Torah, the five foundational books for the Jewish people, even existed.

Why did they know so little? To answer that question and set the context for Josiah’s call for revival, we first need to understand a little of Josiah’s background.

After the Israelites settled into the Promised Land, they were ruled by judges, with God as the ultimate judge. Yet when the people wanted a king, like their neighbors, God anointed first Saul, then David, then Solomon to rule as kings. This kingly succession continued until 931 BCE, when the 12 tribes of Israel broke into 2 kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. History records that the northern kingdom of Israel had kings who were evil, and never followed the ways of the Lord. Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BCE and that kingdom was forever wiped off the map. God’s people continued to survive in Judah, the southern kingdom, seesawing back and forth between good kings and evil kings, kings who were faithful to Almighty God and kings who turned away from God to worship foreign idols.

Scholars differ on the following dates, yet around 726 BCE Hezekiah became king, and ruled for 29 years. Hezekiah was faithful to God and tried to implement many religious reforms. Because of his dependence on God the Assyrian army was stopped in their attempted conquer of Jerusalem.

Good King Hezekiah was followed by his young son Manasseh around 897 BCE, who ruled for 55 years and is remembered as one of the worst kings in Judah’s history. He influenced an entire generation or two with his idol worship and evil ways. He sacrificed his own son to the false god Molech, and shed much innocent blood. He desecrated the Temple of God by allowing false idols and images to be set up and worshipped in that sacred space. Later in his life, Manasseh did repent of his evil ways, yet his evil influence had spread far and wide.

Manasseh’s son Amon followed him as king around 642 BCE, and continued his father’s evil ways. After only two years in office Amon was murdered by his own servants.

This set the stage for Amon’s son Josiah to become king in 640 BCE at the young age of 8. Josiah, however, was able to reign for 31 years before he was killed in battle against the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Thankfully, having begun his rule at such a young age, Josiah had some God-fearing mentors shaping his life, his faith, and his leadership. Only through the grace of God did Josiah not follow in the evil ways of his father and especially his grandfather. Instead, his faith and devotion were more like his great-grandfather, King Hezekiah.

Many scholars attribute Josiah’s faith to having been raised by the high priest Hilkiah, who taught Josiah what little he knew about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who had led their people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Somehow Hilkiah influenced Josiah enough that history remembers this boy-king as one who “did what was right in the sight of the Lord” and “walked in the ways of David.”

Josiah’s story is told not only through the book of 2 Kings but also through the book of 2 Chronicles. 2 Chronicles 34:3 proclaims that in the eighth year of his reign, when Josiah was still a boy, at age 16 he began to seek the God of his ancestor David. In the twelfth year of his reign, when he was 20, is when Josiah began to purge Jerusalem and Judah of the idols and images and altars of the many false gods that the Jews had begun to worship, the idols of the neighboring and conquering tribes and empires, the idols worshipped even by his grandfather Manasseh. These idols had taken the place of the one true God in the hearts of many Jews.

With such a background of faithfulness and idolatry, our Scripture passage today proclaims that

during the 18th year of his reign, when Josiah was 26, a discovery was made in the Temple in Jerusalem that drastically changed the course of Josiah’s life, faith and reign.

Over the years, with kings who turned away from the one true God, the Temple in Jerusalem had fallen into disrepair. Josiah called for the Temple to be renovated. During the renovation,

one day Josiah instructed his secretary Shaphan to instruct Hilkiah, the high priest, to count the Temple offerings collected from the people and to then give those offerings direct to the builders repairing the Temple so that they in turn could take the money to go buy the supplies they needed.

Hilkiah then said to Shaphan, “I have found the scroll of the book of the law in the Temple.”

The scroll passed hands, and Shaphan read it. When Shaphan presented it to Josiah, he did so almost as an afterthought, after reporting the money had delivered in the way the king directed.

From the way the Scripture is written, at first glance one would think this scroll is no big deal.

In reality, however, this scroll is a very big deal! For it is none other than part of the book of the law, part of the Torah, part of the first five books of what we now know as the Old Testament, part of what was seen as the most important texts for the faith history of the Jews. Torah texts are to Jews what the Gospels are to Christians. Finding this scroll was a huge step forward in keeping the faith alive for the people of God soon to be scattered by the exile.

Why or how the scroll was lost, we do not know. Scholars speculate it could have been hidden away, kept from being destroyed by Manasseh, it could have been neglected, or it could have been simply forgotten and abandoned on a shelf.

Yet without the scroll, without the sacred texts, the people of God were forgetting how to live God’s people. They were not being taught the stories of their faith ancestors. And they were not worshipping God in the way they ought to both in the Temple and in their hearts.

Throughout history, from early Israel to the Dark Ages to modern times in oppressive countries,

withholding the Word of God was often a power play by whoever was in control. There are even places in our world today where it is still illegal to own a Bible. For every time God’s Word has been found or read or released in a new way, revival breaks out, leading to changed lives, renewed worship and even societal transformation.

This was true for Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

This was true for John Wesley and the people called Methodists in the 1700s.

This was true for Evan Roberts and the Welsh revival of the 1700s.

And this is currently true in the Celina, Ohio area in the past year.

When Josiah heard the scroll read to him for the first time, he tore his clothes as a sign of repentance, distraught over what he heard and knowing how far God’s people had strayed from where God intended them to be.

Immediately Josiah sent Shaphan, Hilkiah and several others to the prophetess Huldah to verify the consequences of ignoring God’s word for so many years. She affirmed that indeed there would be consequences, as stated in the scroll, and while disaster would one day take over the land, Josiah would be spared from experiencing such disaster.

When you read through the Old Testament, when you study the history of the Christian Church, there is a distinct pattern observed time and again, a cycle that unfortunately repeats itself over and over, times of brokenness and sin and open rebellion followed by a call to revival or repentance or the resurgence of the importance of God and God’s word which then leads to a time of renewal. The cycle is constant--sin and renewal, brokenness and revival, rebellion and forgiveness—because we are human beings with a sinful nature and a loving God.

Because of Josiah’s deep faith, he, like King Hezekiah, called all of the religious leaders and elders, and all of the people of Judah and Jerusalem, small and great, young and old alike, to hear anew the word of God written on the scroll, then respond to the word of God through a renewal of the covenant between God and the people of God.

Josiah called the people to join him in following the Lord, keeping the Lord’s commandments, laws and regulations with all their heart and soul.

Josiah called the people to worship God and God alone, and to have no other gods. Josiah escalated in scope and scale what he had begun earlier in tearing down places of idol worship.

He tore down the idols, he defiled the altars, he burned down the temples, and he dismissed or even killed the priests.

Josiah revived worship of the one True God, the God of his faith ancestors, the God of Abraham and David, reviving worship in the Temple and reinstating the Passover festival which had not been celebrated for longer than anyone could remember.

Imagine being a Jew and having never celebrated Passover, remembering and rejoicing in God’s deliverance of God’s people from slavery in Egypt.

Imagine being a Jew and having never been taught the stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and Joshua, of King Saul and King David. This was in direct violation of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 which proclaimed that the commandments of God were to be taught to the children and remembered daily.

Imagine being a Jew and once again called to make a choice—choose good or evil, choose the worship of Baal or the worship of Almighty God, choose to follow your young king, or reject his decrees and covenant renewal in favor of doing what you want and worshiping what you want.

.. Don Williams, a pastor in San Diego, has written:

‘Worship money, become a greedy person. Worship sex, become a lustful person. Worship power, become a corrupt person. Worship Jesus, become a Christlike person.’ His point is: ‘We become like what we worship.’

New Testament scholar Greg Beale says in one of his books,

‘What you revere you resemble, either for ruin or restoration.’

-taken from Isaac Butterworth “Serendipity: An Accidental (But Pleasant) Discovery” 4-29-11 sermoncentral.com

Josiah knew that whatever he did may not make much difference in the future of his kingdom, which was on an inevitable path of destruction, yet he knew in his heart of hearts he was still called to lead God’s people to do the right thing. So they renewed their covenant with God not to hedge their bets, not to stay the judgement of God, but only to do what was right in the eyes of God, to seek repentance for their sins and the sins of their ancestors, to do what they knew God wanted them to do.

I believe that this renewal of God’s word and ways, this renewal of worship and the Passover celebration, were the memories the people of God then carried forth into exile when they were forcibly removed from Judah by the Babylonians just a mere four kings after Josiah, less than 20 years later.

Josiah’s call to revival was a call to his people to remember who and whose they were, to remember who God is and who they were in relation to God.

This summer we are reflecting on stories such as Josiah’s to remind us that God has, does and will continue to choose the most ordinary and unlikely among us to be heroes of the faith.

This includes each and every one of us. We aren’t likely to wear a cape and go flying through the air; rather, we are heroes whom others look upon as those who are examples of love and hope and grace, examples of how to live faithfully following Jesus, in our lives and in our world.

Brothers and sisters, Josiah speaks not only to his time, but to all of us here today. The time is now for another faith revival.

The world has dismissed the church as irrelevant and irresponsible. Statistics show that there are now more men and women in our country who are “nones” and “dones” than there are those who claim an active, ongoing faith in Jesus Christ. Nones and dones are those with no faith association and those once active in the church yet have given up or burned out of the church.

The time is right for revival. And that revival is happening, and will happen, as lives and churches and regions are transformed by the grace of God and the hope of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit boldly proclaiming that God’s not dead, and neither is the church.

What the church will look like in another 20 years may be drastically different than it is today.

Yet our call to follow Jesus, our call to share the hope of Jesus with a hurting world, our call to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the midst of our everyday lives—that call will never change.

What will change is how we live out our calling.

Josiah’s call to revival then is also God’s call to revival to us today.

\*Remember who and whose we are, beloved sons and daughters claimed, called and commissioned by God

\*Recover God’s Word by reading and reflecting on the stories and characters of the bible

\*Celebrate God’s story through communal worship and partaking in the sacraments of baptism and holy communion

\*Rekindle the fire of our faith within us and among us

I heard Bishop Palmer once ask: What animates you about the gospel of Jesus Christ? What gives you life? And what fruit do you produce for the glory of God?

Those are powerful questions for all of us. What stirs the embers of our faith into a powerful witness? What renews our faith? How open are we to the revival of our hearts and souls?

This week, and through the rest of the summer, I invite you to do three things to revive the faith that is within you.

1- Say to yourself at least once a day: I am a beloved child of God

2- Spend five more minutes a day in God’s Word

3- Specifically pray each week for God to rekindle in us a desire to be God’s people in this world

May we listen to the boy-king of long ago for the renewal of our hearts and lives and church here today.

May it be so. Let us pray.