

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 2 Kings 23:1-9
Sermon Title: "Keeping the Ship Afloat: Worship"

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You don't know what you've got until it is gone. We don't know how good we have it, until something is taken from us and possibly lost forever. The death of a loved one is difficult to handle: we definitely miss those people. The loss of a job, especially if we are fired or laid-off: we don't realize how good it is to have a regular source of income every month. The break-up of a family: children missing mom or dad being around all the time. Seeing our 18-year-old teenagers venture off to college: well, maybe we don't miss them that much. Maybe we think we will have it good not having them around. No, we love our children at any age. When they go off to college, and we get that "empty nest" feeling, we don't know what we had with them around, until they are gone.

We may take life for granted. We assume our lives will always travel down the same, normal paths. And then something goes missing and we cannot get it back, we sure do wish we could get it back.

Josiah becomes the new king of Judah, but he is only eight years of age.¹ He is too young to rule an entire nation, so he needs time to grow up. He is groomed by trusted advisors in the ways of government and commerce and diplomatic rule. One of those advisors is the prophet Zephaniah, who is a godly man who will teach the new king about the King of kings and Lord of lords. Josiah will hear about YHWH, and how YHWH released his people from the clutches of Egypt and set them in a new land, and gave them blessings upon blessings so long as they worshipped YHWH. The new king will learn how disappointed YHWH has become with Judah, and how far out of line the people had gone in not worshipping their one true God. He will see how things are a big mess and will decide to clean it up.

You don't know what you've got, until it is gone. When King Josiah reaches the age of 18, he will do what it takes to get back that which was lost, and set the people down a path with God as their Guide and God as their ultimate Goal and Desire. He starts with the temple, and tells the Secretary of State to tell the High Priest to gather all the money that people have donated to the church treasury, and to use that money to refurbish the house of the Lord. It is time to flip

¹ The following sentences may be found in 2 Kings 22.

God's temple, Extreme Makeover YHWH Edition.

As they do so, the High Priest makes a discovery. He has found the Book of the Law. The Secretary of State opens the Book and reads it to the King. Josiah hears everything he had learned from the prophet Zephaniah. He hears the story of Israel's rescue and of Israel's long journey through the wilderness. He hears every one of God's laws and ordinances and statutes that he had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. When the reading is finished, the king rips his royal robe in two. He is stunned and humiliated by what he and his people have not done to uphold the sacred words of God. He commands the Secretary of State, the High Priest, and others to pray and inquire what God wants him to do next. "Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us," King Josiah says, "because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book."² This needs to change.

Now we come to our reading today in 2 Kings 23, and we see what King Josiah does with the people in renewing their worship of God. Everyone is gathered for a worship service. The king reads the Book of the Law, so that everyone may understand who God is and what he wants them to do. He then stands by a pillar,

² 2 Kings 22:13.

a place of religious significance that will play an important role in the worship of the people. The king positions himself next to this pillar, and makes a covenant with the Lord on behalf of everybody.

Worship may be many things, but we can say that worship is the renewing of our covenant with God. We rededicate ourselves to the Lord, and to the service of our God. We strengthen the commitments that we have made to God, and pledge that we will carry them out with all purpose and joy. A covenant is a pact, an agreement between two parties. In a covenant the parties agree to live in harmony together, and to do certain things in order to keep the relationship growing. Between us and God the covenant is this: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.”³ It is as simple as that. We have a God to worship, and we have a God to care for us.

Yet this covenant needs to be renewed on a regular basis, because too often we step away from the covenant between us and God. We break contact. We fail to keep up our end of the bargain, so to speak. Sin loves to interrupt that constant flow of relationship between us and God. Sin tells us to take a vacation from covenant and do our own thing. “It’s okay,” sin says, “It’s just for this time. Do what you want,

³ Leviticus 26:12.

because it feels good, because you want to, because it's Friday night, because everybody else is out of covenant with God and having a good time. You might as well enjoy being out of covenant, too." If we stray far enough, we will miss God. We won't recognize what that covenant is between us, or even how to piece it all together. We don't know what we've got until it is gone.

Our covenant needs to be renewed on a regular basis. This is where worship comes in. Notice that in their worship, the king commanded the High Priest to remove all the articles of Baal.⁴ Baal was a Canaanite god associated with the weather, namely thunderstorms. Zeus was also known for his lightning bolts. King Josiah says, "None of the rubbish anymore. Get rid of Baal, because we don't worship him. He brings nothing to us, not even good or bad weather." The king also got rid of idolatrous articles belonging to Asherah, a Canaanite goddess connected with the sea. The people tossed out a boatload of stuff: wooden images, incense burners, ritual booths, altars. The people had to destroy all that stuff, because they were in no way connected with the Lord God. False gods hinder us from worshipping the living God and renewing covenant with him.

⁴ Cf. 2 Kings 23:4-9.

The king even commanded the people to toss out the idolatrous priests who facilitated worship to Baal and Asherah.⁵ Sometimes, in order to return to God, we have to say goodbye to people who do us no good. They bring us down, they spread negativity in everything they do, and they do not want to change like we do. We cannot let them drag us deeper in sin. We are serious about our relationship with God, whereas those so-called friends are not. If they are not willing to be transformed as we want to be, we have to let them go. It is difficult to do – there is pain involved when saying goodbye. But covenant with God is most important. Renewing that covenant constantly is vital.

When all that junk and nonsense is destroyed – when we have cleaned house – what is left is an open space to adore God. Here in worship we do more than sing pretty songs and say heartfelt prayers and listen to awesome sermons. Here we renew covenant. Here we pledge ourselves anew to the God who pledges to love us always. Here we say there is no god but the living God. Nothing and nobody can replace God, or will replace God. Here we learn again who God is and what he requires of us. Here we stand with God to hear how he removes our sin and restores our very lives. And here we realize that God pledges to be a

⁵ Cf. 2 Kings 23:5, 8.

part of our lives, no matter what befalls us. Worship is a great chance to recharge, refocus, and reinvigorate this relationship with God, whom we could never live without.

The people of Judah have been missing out for far too long. King Josiah, sent by God, knows what to do with the law of God, and together with the nation he renews the covenant to keep God's commandments and statutes, and to love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

Notice who is assembled, as the king renews the covenant of God. Both the young and old are present. Both the rich and poor are present. Everybody needs God. All of us need to renew relationship with God on a regular basis.

Our culture has established too many finish lines for people to cross. We see life as a race with death being the ultimate finish line, but along the path of life we cross a whole bunch of finish lines, and there are simply too many of them. It used to be that only teenagers received diplomas for graduating from high school, but nowadays children of the age of 5 are receiving diplomas for graduating from kindergarten or preschool. They get a piece of paper, and their parents take a bunch of pictures, and the little child gets this

sense of, “Now that’s finished. Crossed that line. Don’t have to do that again.” And then there are some schools that graduate eighth graders to high school. They hold a big ceremony, and the parents take a bunch of pictures, and the teenagers get a sense of, “Now that’s finished. Crossed that line. Don’t have to do that again.” We mentioned graduating from high school and even from college, and the young adults get a sense of, “Now that’s finished. Crossed that line. Don’t have to do that again.” Then there are the finish lines of buying your first house, having your first child, getting your first job, getting your first job promotion, and people think, “Now that’s finished. Crossed that line. Don’t have to do that again.” Of course, retirement is a big finish line, in which people think they don’t have to do anything anymore.

All these finish lines make people lazy. They give people the sense of accomplishment, which may be celebrated, but it also gives people the false sense that they don’t have to do anything else. They’re finished. Don’t have to do that again. I got that sense when I graduated with a doctorate. It was the highest and possibly the last degree I could ever achieve. It felt great – I was on Cloud 9 for four full months. And then I came down to earth, and looked around, and said, “Now what?” I must admit I felt an empty void.

Finish lines can do this to us. We don't know what to do next, and so we may become lazy and choose not to do anything else.

Covenant with God does not have any finish lines. The worship of God never starts and then stops at some point. It doesn't matter if we are young or old, the covenant with God needs to be renewed. It doesn't matter if we just graduated from school and are entering the work world, or we've been in the work world for several years, the covenant needs to be renewed. It doesn't matter if we are a senior in high school or college and ready to see school finished, the covenant needs to be renewed. It doesn't matter if we have just retired or have been retired for ten years, the covenant needs to be renewed.

It is as constant as the coming seasons. It is never-ending like the high and low tides. If we ever say this about our worship of God, "Now that's finished; crossed that line," we will fall apart like the people of Judah did before King Josiah came on the scene. Neglecting to continue our worship of God makes us lazy. The relationship suffers. Covenant is easily broken.

Worship is a powerful undertaking. Foundations are shaken. Old ways are washed away. Hearts are

moved. Bodies are activated. Relationship is restored. Lives are transformed.

When we come to this place of worship, or even we enter any space to worship the Lord, we discover that God “calls, teaches, and leads his people into a new way of life.”⁶ We hear the “good news of our salvation” and are “saved from our sins and transformed into [God’s] image.” We unite together in one body, and together we “are made [active] participants in the coming kingdom.”

⁶ The following quotes come from Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship*, 8.