

Daily Reflections



Center for Spiritual Development

JERUSALEM, THE CITY LOST AND FOUND

By David C. Robinson, SJ

A Reading from the Book of 2 Kings

The scribe Shaphan also informed the king that the priest Hilkiyah had given him a book, and then read it aloud to the king. When the king heard the contents of the book of the law, he tore his garments and issued this command to Hilkiyah the priest ... the scribe Shaphan, and the king's servant Asaiah: "Go, consult the LORD for me, for the people, for all Judah, about the stipulations of this book that has been found, for the anger of the LORD has been set furiously ablaze against us, because our fathers did not obey the stipulations of this book, nor fulfill our written obligations." ... The king then had all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem summoned together before him. The king went up to the temple of the LORD with all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: priests, prophets, and all the people, small and great. He had the entire contents of the book of the covenant that had been found in the temple of the LORD, read out to them. Standing by the column, the king made a covenant before the LORD that they would follow him and observe his ordinances, statutes and decrees with their whole hearts and souls, thus reviving the terms of the covenant which were written in this book.

And all the people stood as participants in the covenant.

2 KINGS 22:10-13; 23:1-3

Reflection

Perusing the history of the people of Israel and their volatile relationship to God's Covenant as manifested in the Mosaic Law, we encounter an extraordinarily topsy-turvy lineage of political, social, and religious upheaval. For generations, the identity of God's people was buffeted by the voracious and destructive behavior of kings, priests, and courts who chose idolatry and corruption over fidelity and religious tradition. In the nearly sixty years before the reign of King Josiah, his predecessors, Manasseh and his son, Amon, built altars to the Baals, and shed the blood of countless innocents. Knowledge of the Law was buried in apostasy.

As king Josiah attempts to rebuild the neglected temple structure, Hilkiah, the High Priest, uncovers the Book of the Law which is then read to the king by Shaphan the scribe. Josiah, a man committed to the rule of God in the lives of the people of Israel, is shattered by the realization of the enormity of the heretical and debased behavior of those who came before. He summons the 'priests, prophets, elders, and all the people' to the temple, where the text of the Law is read. The crowd is deeply moved, and **standing by the column, the king made a covenant before the LORD that they would follow him and observe his ordinances, statutes and decrees with their whole hearts and souls, thus reviving the terms of the covenant which were written in this book. And all the people stood as participants in the covenant.**

However, in keeping with the unstable history of those who had gone before him, Josiah is not the herald of a new Golden Age of Covenant life. His sons, who follow him after his death, return to the same swamp of heresy and debased behavior that had dominated the kingship of Judah in prior generations. Finally, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, invades the country, strips the temple of its riches, and reduces the country to ruins. A series of puppet kings follows, and when the last, Zedekiah, rebels against the king, his armies burn Jerusalem to the ground.

This litany of remorse and disaster might seem to be a disheartening glance into the history of the Jewish people in the 6th and 7th century BCE. However, as the incendiary nature of contemporary political action we witness on a global scale makes clear, simply claiming the validation of religious or spiritual systems does not guarantee a fruitful life or future for anyone. As Jesus upends

the Pharisees' attempt to trick him in matters of the Law, he returns to the quintessential mandate of God to the people when he claims them as his own: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”** (Matthew 22:38-40).

The simple profundity of the Commandment of Love should remind us all that facile rhetoric or proof-texting from any source can only distance us from the compelling love which God has manifested to all the world. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 3: **the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.** It hardly needs clarifying that Paul is not dismissing the wisdom of the heart, born of humility, compassion, and service, but rather the self-inflating egoism manifested in the ‘authority’ claimed by religious or political charlatans who substitute bravura for pastoral sincerity. The history of Israel through the centuries of growth, power, decay, and collapse stands as a harsh reminder that God’s invitation is simple and pure. Trying to broker such truth to partisan ends only leads to collapse and failure, but the labor of learning the uncluttered power of a loving faith always remains to invite our return. Loving God with all one’s heart is not a destination. Rather, it is a perpetual gateway to a truth that can constantly be tuned more completely to the wisdom of God.



The Wailing Wall
Photo by Denis Doukhan

For Pondering

- What does it mean to you that you love God with all your heart, soul, and mind?
 - Have you had an experience of losing your focus on God? How did that impact your ability to keep your attention on a vocation of faith?
 - Have you undergone a period of 'failure' in your life walk? What did you hold fast to as you attempted to 'find your way back?'
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