

Sermon 12.20.20: The Kings and Their Gods  
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I'm going to talk about a couple of books from the Hebrew bible today and these are pretty obscure books: Kings I and Kings II. At the urging of a minister friend of mine who works as a labor organizer in Buffalo, I read the book "The Kings and Their Gods: A Pathology of Power" written by Daniel Berrigan. Berrigan's book looks at Kings I & II through a modern lens.

Kings I begin with the death of King David, and the two books move through the stories of many kings in that period: Solomon, Jerobaum, Ahab, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Judah and more. The books are based on historical events from 965 BCE to 567 BCE, so there's some basis in fact and also plenty of interpretation of the interventions of an old testament God.

The books are actually pretty fascinating reads, full of compelling stories of encounters between warring tribes and family drama and colorful turns of phrase. At one point a group of rebellious subjects come to Solomon and ask for his mercy, saying that his father David would have been merciful. Solomon responds by saying: "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins! Where my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions!" Yikes! Don't let anyone tell you that the bible is boring.

There are a lot of stories in Kings I and II but the gist of them is that Israel becomes a wealthy and powerful country, controlling the lands in the near east and building temples and huge armies. They do this by enslaving many people and using their military might to extend their power and wealth. It doesn't go well for Israel though: by the end of the books, Israel is divided and eventually ends up in captivity to another kingdom.

The conventional interpretation of these events, stated explicitly in the texts, is that Israel is punished because it fails to be loyal to God. It's leaders drift off to worshipping other gods and the one true god is angry and punishes them.

Daniel Berrigan has a different take: he reads the books and draws the conclusion that kings choose convenient gods. In fact, kings, whether they ruled 2,500 years

ago or right now, often focus on gods that reflect back to them what they consider to be most important. The Kings of ancient Israel had gods that justified their muting the voices of women, that justified enslaving whole groups of people, that justified keeping huge standing armies for maintaining power and wealth. The kings choose convenient gods, who look a lot like them.

We see a plenty of that in our own time. Certainly our recently deposed King Trump worshipped a god of vanity and self-interest that justified interfering with our democracy and self-dealing to enrich himself. Greed and the acquisition of power are certainly gods in the United States.

But our larger country relies on slaves and militarism to promote the empire as a religion too. If you've watched a sporting event recently you probably saw something happen that seems so normal that maybe you didn't even notice it. The event begins with a religious ceremony: a hymn is sung (actually, the national anthem) in the presence of a military honor guard, symbolic priests of a cult of militarism. On the high holidays like the super bowl, a billion dollars worth of fighter planes will fly over, offering the final blessing. It's a religious act.

And while explicit slavery isn't legal here anymore, this country is fine with placing people in a kind of legal slavery. This country worships the religion of capitalism fervently. People work two jobs and have no health care, no guarantee of housing, no promise of a secure and comfortable retirement. The religion of capitalism decrees that the market set wages, and our corporate priest class render us in a legal slavery that would make Jerobaum blush.

And let's be bipartisan about this: Barak Obama started attending Rev. Jeremiah Wright's church in the 80's when he was an organizer in Chicago. He and Michelle got married there and their children were baptized in that church. But Rev. Wright was a fiery minister, and his truth-telling did not play well with those who would continue the status quo of the United States as empire. You may have heard of the sermon Rev. Wright gave after 9/11 when he said that instead of God bless America we should be saying god damn America. And I want to acknowledge that Rev. Wright also said some anti-Semitic stuff, and that is wrong.

But he also spoke about the internment camps and the reservations and all the ways this country has failed to live into its values. But over time, the god that Rev. Wright answered to became inconvenient for now-president Obama, and he eventually cut his ties with the church where his family was formed. Kings choose their gods.

Reverend Wright brings us another point that Berrigan makes about Kings and their gods. Berrigan points out that the absence of prophets makes it easier for Kings to worship immoral gods. It's notable that in the first part of Kings when Israel is on the ascent, there are no prophets present to protest, or to criticize, or to offer another path.

Fortunately we are blessed with many prophets, and this seems like a good time to talk about Daniel Berrigan. Berrigan was a Jesuit Priest who passed in 2016 at the age of 94. He and his brother Phillip, a former priest, were outspoken critics of militarism, starting with the Viet Nam war.

In 1968 he and a group of activists entered the draft board in Catonsville MD, stole draft records and burnt them using homemade napalm. Berrigan would say "that killing others was repugnant to the letter and spirit of the Sermon on the Mount,"

He was a member of the Jesuit order but was always an outsider. He went to jail for his moral stance in 1968 and when he got out of prison in 1972, he moved into a Jesuit residence in NYC. He then went on a lecture tour where he did not back down from his beliefs and when he returned to the Jesuit residence, he found the locks changed and his few possessions in boxes outside the entrance.

I want to read you a piece from a review of a biography of Berrigan by Patrick Henry:

"They [the Jesuits] almost kicked me into outer darkness after Catonsville," wrote Dan years later to his brother Phil, "[but I] was saved by...[Provincial Robert] Mitchell, who flew to Rome to stop the show." His law-breaking actions also alienated him more generally from both Catholic clergy and laity. The Catholic hierarchy supported the war in Vietnam. Generally speaking, Catholics were fiercely patriotic. They wanted to prove that there was no contradiction between being Catholic and being American. This emerged grotesquely in Cardinal Francis Spellman's infamous "My country, right or wrong."

End of quote.

Berrigan did not care about being an outsider. In fact, he's notorious for saying "A good way to create a peace movement is to start small and get smaller."

After the Viet Nam war, Berrigan worked for nuclear disarmament. In his mind, this marked a passage from civil disobedience to divine obedience as expressed in Isaiah 2:4 — "They shall beat their swords into plowshares." Plowshares become the name of the movement that Berrigan was part of.

On Sept. 9, 1980, the first Plowshares action took place. The Plowshares group could not live with the possibility of nuclear war, and felt that to even hold nuclear weapons was a sin. So the Plowshares Eight, which included Dan and his brother Phil, entered the General Electric Facility in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Using hammers, they damaged two nuclear warhead cones of Mark 12A missiles and poured their own blood on top-secret blueprints. Berrigan had a flair for the dramatic but more importantly, he was not afraid to be accountable for his actions. When they did the two acts of civil disobedience that I just described, they didn't run away after. They stayed put so that they could be arrested and use their time in court to make their moral arguments publicly.

Over time, Berrigan was recognized as the prophet he was, and his beliefs moved from the fringes towards the center. Not completely to the center, however. It's worth noting the U.S College of Catholic Cardinals unanimously voted to support the war in Afghanistan. The work of a prophet is slow.

And it's easy to see the prophets all around us these days. What a blessing! And I think there are prophets in this congregation, working quietly from their convictions to make a more just and caring world. Everyone here can be a prophet. We just need to consider our theologies. Here's how I think about theology or a set of beliefs when I'm trying to decide if an idea is right for me. I ask myself: is this theology life expanding, or life limiting? There's a local minister who's a leader of a large church who goes on twitter to rail against the shutdowns that the governor has imposed to curb the pandemic. I see his posts and I'm like "what theology is this guy operating from? How does he justify holding live worship right now?" I don't understand his theology but I have to say, it's not life expanding.

Anyway, that criteria of life expanding versus life limiting can help us create moral imperatives. It can help us become prophets, each in our own small way.

So I'm hoping that hearing about these kings from 2500 years ago is a bit of a comfort. This kind of behavior from our leaders has been around for a long, long time, long enough to bring us to ask if it's not just part of the human condition. Maybe that's small comfort, or no comfort at all.

And I want to say, I know how weary we all are right now. I know that we all have some despair.

In the reading Thomas Merton wrote: “we should all be sick in some way. We should all feel near to despair in some sense, because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours.”

The despair we feel is hard to bear, but it also shows us that we are not numb to the suffering of others. It shows us that our humanity is still intact. And there is a dignity and wisdom in that. Kings will choose their gods, and there’s only so much that we can do about it. But our bearing witness, and hurting along with the most vulnerable, has nobility and grace in it. In that compassion, lies the seeds for us to become prophets.

May it be so.