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Imagine two political rivals striving to be the chosen leader of a wealthy nation. One leader uses deceptive methods to try and win the place of leadership. The other leader ignores the wisdom of advisors and spews harsh words. The nation becomes fragmented. The loyalty of the people becomes divided.

When have you heard of such a situation? Of a nation divided? Of political corruption? Of loyalty torn between two opposing leaders?

Some of you may be concerned that this morning's sermon sounds like a modern-day political scenario, but in fact, I'm describing the situation that God's people faced about 3000 years ago described in the book of 1 Kings.

Sometimes when reading a biblical text, such as the one from 1 Kings, I mutter to myself, "Why did the biblical writers include *this* story? What *did* they have in mind?" Since I prepare to speak in worship about the Bible every week and I lead weekly Bible studies, many times I wonder what to say or teach about particular scriptures, and today happens to be one of those times.

Lighten Up, Will You?
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The passage from 1 Kings is filled with the politics of two opposing sides, so I hesitate to even bring up the topic. Most of us know how political conversations go, with both sides claiming to have the answers while condemning the other side for having the wrong answers. In our own highly divided nation, it's dangerous to state a political view, for one never knows how another person may react. You've probably heard these conversations, right? "Did you hear what that Democrat said? What about those Republican ideas?" Some might justify their position by saying, "I heard it on FOX News," while others will proclaim, "But on CNN they said such and such." Sometimes the conversations get so heated that I want to say, "Lighten up, will you?"

I wanted to yell this phrase this week as I read news stories about our own governmental issues, "Lighten up, will you? I'm tired of all the arguing and bickering." That's what I also wanted to say as I read the story from 1 Kings, for Rehoboam and Jeroboam had two different views on how to run the ancient nation of Israel. Previously, the nation had been united under the famous King David's

1 Kings 12:1, 3-8

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leadership, and his son, Solomon, continued that leadership after David died. Solomon was considered very wise, for under his leadership he created secure borders and much wealth, but any political foe could have dug up political campaign dirt about his many foreign wives and his worship of idols, which left his record somewhat tarnished. It's a reminder that even the greatest leaders are human and have flaws.

After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam became the new king. But...there's another claim to the throne lurking in the shadows: Jeroboam. He had been King Solomon's official with many responsibilities and had his own hopes of being king, but when his plot to become king was discovered during Solomon's reign, Jeroboam ran away to hide in Egypt. Once King Solomon died, Jeroboam showed up to offer his suggestions on how to run the government. Jeroboam and a huge delegation came before the newly appointed King Rehoboam and said, "Your father taxed us quite heavily and worked us hard, and we wondered if

you might give us a break—you know, lighten up a bit?"

The new king replied, "Let me think about it. Come back in three days."

King Rehoboam called all the elders together who had served his father and asked for their advice, and they replied, "If you speak kind words to the people, they will faithfully follow you. We suggest you lighten up on them."

Rehoboam then went to his buddies, young guys who liked being in power, and he asked them, "How should I reply to these people who have asked me to lighten up their workload from my father's harsh conditions?"

These young advisors had just the opposite advice from the elders, "Tell those people that they haven't seen anything yet. Go give it to them, Rehoboam!"

When Jeroboam and the people returned three days later, the new king told them, "My pinky finger is thicker than my dad's waist, so if my father made your workload heavy, I'll make it even heavier!"

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That didn't go over well, so Jeroboam and his delegation went back home to their northern territories, and they decided to separate, with the result that Rehoboam had two tribes to rule in the south and Jeroboam had ten tribes in the north, leading to the separation into two nations: the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capitol in Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

As I read this text over and over again this week, I kept asking myself, *What's the point of reading this text in worship? What do I say about this bit of history from 3000 years ago that can bring us hope today? We have enough division in our own nation, so do we need to hear about this division of a nation 3000 years ago?*

Several times I was tempted to ignore this story, to find something else to reflect on today, but the situation millennia ago kept echoing in my mind. And then I read someone's thoughts on a blog that reminded me how we are connected:

As we look at this passage together [from 1 Kings], let us remember why we are following

these ancient stories—stories that began with Creation, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; stories about Moses, Ruth, and David. We are following the story of God's people; we are following *our* story. The moment we were baptized into the Church, the day we confirmed the faith, the occasion we decided to say 'Yes!' to Jesus and follow him, we entered this very story of life and faith. In that moment, the men and women I've just named became our ancestors—every bit as real as those folks named on your family tree. Your family tree follows our blood-line; the Bible gives us our faith-line.¹

That's why this story of political unrest is important for us to hear, for it reminds us that God's people have been facing these issues for thousands of years—and probably longer. Their struggle is part of our faith story, for in their unrest, they continued to remember how God was with them. The world is not a perfect place, but the Bible reminds us that God continues to move among us as we struggle with the realities of our lives. In the midst of our dividedness, when we feel fragmented and torn apart, when we find ourselves angry at the hostile atmosphere around us, look at the bigger

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picture. It's so easy to get caught up in the political arena of the day and to reflect the tension by posting negative Facebook commentaries, sending divisive text messages, raising our voices, spewing harsh words, or tweeting half-truths. For what purpose? To create more division? To justify our own partially true and somewhat mistaken ideas?

Leaders have tried to divide the loyalties of followers throughout history—their attempts for power scattered throughout history. In the midst of the ups and downs, successes and failures, a common thread continues to weave throughout these fragmented times: God's Spirit has moved among us, giving us hope, bringing new possibilities even in the most desperate of times.

During our uncertainty, when political rivals seem to tear us apart, it's important to remember

whom to listen to, as the President was reminded one time he gathered for prayer.

The story is told around Washington about former presidential assistant Bill Moyers who has a strong Baptist heritage and is presently a popular political commentator. Moyers was at a lunch with President Johnson and was giving thanks. His prayer was interrupted by the president, who said, "Speak up, I can't hear you." Muttered Moyers, "I wasn't speaking to you, Mr. President."²

During the times of division, when our nation seems fragmented, lighten up, will you, and listen to one another with ears of compassion rather than spewing words of division. Remember the One who brings us together as one nation, as one people, as one world.

¹ <https://jonpredica.blogspot.com/2019/10/sermon-sketches-i-kings-121-17-25-29.html>

² Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3745-3748). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #719.