

July 1, 2007
Luke 9:51-62, II Kings 2:1-2; 6-14
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“The Mantle”

I like to walk or run on the Monon. I like to practice the sermon on the Monon. As I was walking the Monon, coming at me from the opposite direction was a wonderful, single young adult, a man who attends this church. He was roller-blading, fluidly, gracefully. He waved to me and said, “Hi, Dr Joan,” as he jetted by. As I turned to wave, he spun around and came back along side. He said he loves coming to worship at Second Presbyterian. He brings his questions, the big ones, about life and love, about purpose and job, he said, as he listens to the sermons, the scriptures, the choir and Dr. Heather Hinton’s organ music. He said it was right here in this sanctuary..... that it all came together for him, who he would vote for in the next Presidential election. “It did?” I said. “Oh, yes. I’m ready. When I was a kid, the Fourth of July was all about cookouts and fireworks. And then in high school, I had to write a paper on the Presidential candidates and their promises and we had a mock debate in history class. But now,” he said, “now that I’m in my 20’s and can vote, and I’m in the real world, I know there’s more to the Fourth of July than hamburgers, my mom’s potato salad and fireworks. It’s a lot about being one nation, under God. I don’t have all the issues worked out in my head, yet, about stem cells, and gay rights, and reproductive freedom, but I know you start with God.” Then he had to zoom back to catch up with his girl friend. He said he attends with his girl friend. She sits right beside him. They hold hands. Is that alright in church? She hasn’t made up her mind who she is voting for yet. She’s interested in the immigration question.

Aunt Lydia was a woman who could make up her mind, I’ll tell you what. She was bright. She was intelligent. She was well-informed on current events and determined. Smith College taught women to think and make their own decisions. “Make your own decisions,” they said, “or someone else will make your decisions for you.” And so she did. She thought through things. She thought Republican. We knew half her brain was Presbyterian and the other half was Republican. But let’s be clear and equal - we live in a great country with three terrific American parties: Republican, Democrat.....and Tupperware. I don’t know how she became Republican. I wouldn’t say she was...foaming at the mouth Republicanbut she was strongly persuaded and actively committed.

Her husband, my Uncle George, a Democrat, studied philosophy at Yale. Uncle George would go on and on and on about the sovereignty of God over all things, and politics, and democracy, and living noble ideals and that the honor of a country is displayed in its concern for the poor. Sometimes, people in my family just courteously left the room when Uncle George philosophized about God, the supreme ruler. My daughter heard Uncle George. She said, “Mom. Uncle George is so intelligent. I have no idea what he is talking about but he is really smart.”

Aunt Lydia invested herself in politics. She became influential in the Eisenhower and Nixon campaigns in my home state of Ohio. When I went to Uncle George and Aunt Lydia’s big house in Shaker Heights, Ohio, to play Red Light/Green Light, What time is it Mr. Fox? and football in their back yard with my cousin George and his friends, there were “I like Ike” placards all over the house. You couldn’t get very far into the entrance hall and foyer without seeing them, all stacked up, upside down, with the sticks pointing upward. They were resting against the baby grand piano and the silk brocade covered couches in the living room. They were set in bundles against the dark brown leather couch in the library. They were lined along the dining room walls.

These were the years, in the late 40’s and early 50’s, when men and women, your mom, your dad, proudly wore an elephant or a donkey pin on their lapel, in support of their party and their Presidential candidate. My mother had a glittery pin of the American flag on her coat, a pin with red, white and blue rhinestones on it that read: “I like Ike.” I liked to look at it. I didn’t know who Ike was.

It was true for the Democrats too. They had their placards and their pins with donkeys and their Aunt Lydias.

Aunt Lydia was pretty high up in the Republican Party in Ohio, I would imagine. She sat at the head table whenever there was a big whoop-de-doo, right next to Eisenhower and Nixon. When Cleveland, Ohio, still had two newspapers, her picture was right there, smack dab on the front page of the morning paper, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and the evening paper, the Cleveland Press, where no one in the family wanted it. My grandfather thought it was ab-so-lute-ly scandalous, for a woman in our family to be on the front page of the paper, with those.....Politicians. He asked, "Couldn't Lydia find something else to do at Fairmount Presbyterian Church? They always needed volunteers."

The rest of us in the family? Well, we were average, I guess. My father was always the first person to sign in at his polling place: 6 a.m at Malvern School. We stayed home on election night. I remember my mother and father inviting a few friends over to watch the returns on TV. I got to stay up late in my pajamas and watch, too. I knew there was something very, very important happening. Even though it was a school night, my parents wanted me to be part of American history. I gladly ate my roast beef and cheddar cheese sandwiches, and corned beef and Swiss on rye sandwiches from Danny Budin's delicatessen on Lee Road in Shaker Heights, my home town. I drank my milk in a glass with an elephant on it, long after my usual bedtime. I saw my parents and their friends focus on the TV, listening to the commentator announce the early returns from Maine. As Maine goes.....so goes the nation, tallies from New York, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, as the election returns told the nation about the passing of power and the selection of a new leader for the nation. I fell asleep on the floor in my Hopalong Cassidy pajamas and was carried to bed. In the morning, I learned we had a new President.

In the Old Testament passage from 2nd Kings, they, too, woke up to a new man in office. They asked what people in the United States, in Indiana, will also ask: Will life be better with this new person? Will we be safe from neighboring enemies and threatening armies? Will this new leader be wise? What will be his special projects?

Would this new leader be as wise as King David? King David.....now there was a great leader, an ideal ruler. King David, who became king at age 30, now there was a good king who loved the Lord, and administered justice, and there was peace and plenty in the land. King David, reigned for 40 years, and at age 70, knowing he would die, charged his son Solomon to "Be strong in the Lord your God. Walk in God's ways, keep God's statutes, God's commandments, and God's ordinances with faithfulness, that you may prosper in all that you do, and you will not fail."

There were no ballots. There were no debates. There were no other candidates.

Solomon ruled for 40 years. He died. He began his reign asking God for wisdom, an understanding mind to govern his people wisely, the ability to discern good and evil. But his heart strayed and he was not true to God. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He died.

His son, Rehoboam, becomes king at age 41. The Bible says Rehoboam reigned for 17 years. Like his father, he did what was evil and followed other gods.

He died. His son Abijam becomes king. He was a bad king and walked in the ways of his father. His heart was not wholly true to God. He reigns two years.

He dies. His son Asa becomes king. He reigned for 41 years. He was a bad king, like his Father and did what was evil and worshipped pagan gods. He died. His son, Jehosephat, becomes king at age 35. He reigns 25 years. He dies. His brother, Jehoram, becomes king. He reigns 25 years.

This sequence reminds me of the candidate for office who gave a campaign speech in Iowa. At the end of his speech he said, "In conclusion, I would like to thank you so much for coming out tonight. Do you have any.....questions?" From the audience, one person raised their hand, stood up and said: "Yes, I have a question. Who are the other...candidates?"

All of these successive kings did not worship God or inquire of the Lord God Almighty for their direction, their decisions. They walked in other ways. They looked to local pagan gods to make their decisions. Like Aunt Lydia said, "If you don't

make your own decisions, someone else will.”

The Bible takes seriously and watches those who rule nations and make decisions that affect the whole nation. The relationship between God and national leadership and politics is recorded in childlike, bedtime story simplicity in two books in the Old Testament called 1st Kings and 2nd Kings. Kings reads like an obituary for the very soul.....of a nation. And the true soul of a nation is measured, not by ballots, or voting machines, or landslides or mudslides. The true soul of a nation.....is measured by the worship and the presence of God in the nation.

No one stayed up to see who would be the next leader. No one expected much of anything better than the last king. It just didn't matter who was the next ruler. There was no longer any hope. There were no other campaign voices saying, “Look. Over here. I can do better than he did.” No debates between Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, Dennis Kucinich, John McCain, John Edwards, Al Gore, Tommy Thompson, Rudy Giuliani, Joe Biden, Tom Tancredo, Duncan Hunter, Mike Huckabee and others.

It was time for chariots of fire and horses of fire. Fire.....always a sign God has arrived. Pay attention.

After 191 years of consistent and impeccable reigns of utter ruin, it was time for someone to come forth, stand up, take an armful of placards and a hammer and stake them into the ground, placards that said: “There is no God in this land. One here.....One there.....One down the road. Elijah, the prophet, also put up timeless placards, saved from King David's reign, which said:

“Remember: Be strong.
Show yourself mature.
Keep the charge of the Lord your God.
Walk in God's ways.
Keep God's statutes, ordinances, commandments.
And you will prosper as a nation in all you do, wherever you
turn. You cannot fail. You will not fail.”

It takes a person of noble courage, on a mission from God, to do what Elijah did; he told a whole nation, “You have armies, you have money, you have chariots and horses, you have sea power, you have military strategists, you have alliances, you have riches of silver and gold, but you have no God in the land. You have....no....soul.

God always finds the moments to bring out the costly truth and put it right there in front of you. It takes an unafraid prophet, wearing a garment of haircloth, to pound in the stakes for the placards of God, to save the nation.

In the Presbyterian tradition, power is never given exclusively to one person. Power is given to ordered groups, that report to ordered groups, that are accountable and report to other ordered groups. It was on this system, a representational form of democracy, that a new nation, one nation under God, formed itself, 231 years ago, this Fourth of July. Power, in both systems, is five things: 1) always moving, 2) always reviewed, 3) always accountable, 4) always public, 5) always honoring to God.

Some kings paid attention to the prophets. Some kings....did not.

But the story ends in a near crisis, like..... the end of the Sopranos..... for it is time for Elijah to die. Who, then, will speak to leaders and the nation? Who will wear the mantle of miraculous outcomes?

In seminary, all of the pastors here at Second and I had to memorize all the kings AND all of their prophets. The Bible clearly reports that it isn't just the person who is elected that is critical to the nation's strength and direction; it is also their advisors, those who hold a prophetic voice and speak.

This is one shared political truth among those who call themselves fundamentalists, evangelicals, conservatives or liberals can agree on: What is the relationship of the person in power to God, Almighty? And who are the prophets to that ruler?

Two hundred thirty-one years ago this week, it became necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which had connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the laws of God.

They held these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just power from the governed, that whenever government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to abolish it and institute a new government.

With a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we the people, mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor, this July 4, 1776.

And these persons went about hammering placards into the ground.....and the placards read: "There is a God in this land."
And this new nation had a soul. Amen