

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20

28 August 2022

Summer of Stories: Manasseh

Greeting and Opening Prayer: Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning also to all of you who join us online this morning. Welcome to any and all guests here today. May your hearts and minds be encouraged by what you see and hear today in worship with us.

Please join me in prayer: Reigning God, who rules through Christ even over the most powerful political leaders of our day and of days past, we look to you this morning as we once again come to your scriptures. Grace us with ears that listen well and eyes that see anew how you are moving in our midst today. In Jesus name. Amen.

Message: Summer of Stories. We have spent the last 8 Sunday mornings exploring stories with children as central or pivotal characters. We have wandered with the patriarchs. We have wondered at the strength, courage, and resilience of children who have spoken to those in powerful positions. We have marveled at the wisdom and realism of children as they face what seem to be insurmountable circumstances. And we have been baffled by the mysterious in each story that leave us asking more questions. Most of our stories have ended with miraculous and awe-inspiring events or resolutions. I must warn you though that our particular story this morning, that of King Manasseh of Judah has its dark and even darker moments. Power corrupts even the best of people sometimes, and Manasseh seems to be an example of how such corruption and brokenness can be catastrophic for everyone.

First, though, we must set the stage for our story. Last week, we walked the road with the great military commander Naaman as he followed the instructions of his Israelite servant, a young girl captured in Aramean raids of the northern kingdom during the reign of King Jehoram. Naaman realizes the precious trait of humility, while the servant's words are vindicated by the great prophet Elisha. By the time that we reach Manasseh's reign in Judah, the southern kingdom, the northern kingdom of Samaria no longer exists. Almost 150 years have passed. During Manasseh's father's reign in Jerusalem, the Assyrian empire sweeps through the Middle East all the way to Egypt, wiping out any number of kingdoms along the way and subjecting any surviving kingdoms to the role of servant or vassal state, which is what Judah becomes. Manasseh's father, King Hezekiah, becomes one of the vassal kings of the Assyrians, guaranteeing loyalty and most likely yearly payments or taxes to the empire for their protection and mercy. Hezekiah also becomes known for his reforms in worship to God. In the temple, he destroys the idols and altars of Baal, the storm-god of some of Israel's neighbors, and the high places where people sacrificed to Israel's God and other gods, but still outside of Jerusalem. Finally, Hezekiah completed several strategic building projects, most likely in response to the siege that the Assyrians had laid against Jerusalem when they first conquered the region.

One mistake that Hezekiah does make though late in his reign is that he allows ambassadors from Babylon to deliver gifts to him. When they come, he shows them the fortifications of the city of Jerusalem and the treasures in the temple, a terrible political and military mistake, for Babylon has its sights set on conquering Assyria and the rest of its empire, though not quite yet. Hezekiah though has shown that his allegiance is not entirely to the Assyrians as it should be, and the prophet Isaiah has taken notice, fully aware of all that could come crushing down on Jerusalem if those in power decided it. Isaiah confronts Hezekiah about

his foolishness and warns him that one day Babylon will come to Jerusalem's very gates, and Hezekiah responds with little concern because at least for now, the kingdom is peaceful.

When Manasseh is crowned king in place of his father, he is only twelve. We do not hear what brings his father Hezekiah's demise, nor do we know much about his mother, possibly one of several of Hezekiah's wives. Most likely, Manasseh is the oldest of Hezekiah's sons, having the most experience at least in observing his father's reign. Manasseh would have known all about Hezekiah's reforms in returning Judah to its covenantal commitments. Some scholars even speculate that Manasseh would have been crowned king while his father was still living so that he could learn how to rule properly. If this were the case, then Manasseh has even fewer excuses for his misleading the people into worshipping other gods, building what his father had torn down, and killing the innocent. Maybe Manasseh is judged so harshly by the writers of Kings because he had all of the training and upbringing from his father, Hezekiah, before he had to make the difficult royal decisions before him while still under Assyria's empire.

Whatever the circumstances are that surround Manasseh's royal beginnings, his reign seems to only get worse and worse as it grows longer. 55 years on the throne makes Manasseh the longest royal reign of either the northern or southern kingdom. In the background of his time in power, Assyria's grip on the Middle East is waning as their enemies from the southwest in Egypt build their power and their subjects in the southeast of the empire in Babylon are working out their own plans to take over when it is most favorable. Like kids playing king of the hill, the nation at the top of the empire is always at risk of being overthrown or conquered by a larger or stronger enemy. We do not always see all of these geo-political strands running through the scriptures, but just as we watch other parts of the world and our own nation's diplomacy, so these ancient empires were ruthless in their quest for expansion and exploitation at any cost.

So with all of this in mind, I'm going to offer you a couple of ways of reading this story. First, we can read this story of the child-king Manasseh as a story of devolving corruption and evil, in which Manasseh progressively does all that he can to undo all that his father has done as well as silencing any critics that would call him out for his behavior. In this way, I think of the cruelest of leaders in our history who have gone to great lengths to keep their power. One of the most notable parts of this moment in Judah's history is that no prophets speak out against what Manasseh is doing, quite possibly because he has gotten rid of all of them, hence his shedding of innocent blood. We wonder if he also gets rid of his siblings so that they cannot disrupt his work. Like someone with an addiction or horrible illness, we watch him destroy not only his own life but the lives of those around him, his very own people, the ones that he has been charged with shepherding as Judah's king. This might not sound too familiar as I'm telling it in this moment, but I think that this story sounds a little bit like the children who come from a good family and honorable upbringing, but as the community watches them go out on their own, they fall prey to any one of many addictions or life-altering situations. As they continue to devolve, the community and family look on with a certain amount of helplessness, wondering how to make it stop, to bring them back to where they had once been. I wonder if this was how others in the kingdom felt as they remembered Hezekiah but watched Manasseh. Are we left in the end pitying Manasseh for how he has blindly brought Judah many steps closer to its demise?

Alternatively, I offer you another way of looking at the story, which doesn't quite end so abysmally like the narrative in 2 Kings seems to end. We could see Manasseh as the long-serving king of Judah, always stuck between a rock and a hard place as he attempts to rule under the direction of the Assyrian empire, always aware of who might be standing at his front door if he does not toe the line that the empire requires of him. In his desperation to keep Judah as its own

nation at least in Jerusalem, rather than a pile of rubble left behind by the Assyrian armies, Manasseh institutes any number of new laws to keep those in Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, content. What Hezekiah had experienced as the Assyrian army was trampling across Palestine, Manasseh is experiencing ten-fold as he attempts to maintain peace. Think of the details presented: King Manasseh introduces worship of the sun, moon, and stars, which was the Assyrians' astral religion, possibly something required of him or something that he hoped would give him good standing in the eyes of the empire. He rebuilds the high places and the Baal and Asherah altars as a way to welcome in his neighbors, who may be his allies one day if Assyria turns on him. Also, rebuilding the high places could be strategic as well because then worship is spread out across the region of Judah rather than large groups of people gathering in Jerusalem to worship, which may have been seen as a gathering army to resist or rebel against the empire.

Finally, if we take Chronicles additions to the book of Kings' version of Manasseh's story, then we could see how Manasseh had thought sacrificing his own children might have been necessary. Whenever the Assyrians came around again to take him captive, as 2 Chronicles states, Manasseh desperately might have offered one of his children to God as a last-ditch act of worship, hoping that God would respond by saving him from his enemies. What we find out then in Chronicles is that all of his plans do not bring about the goal that he seeks but instead lead him in the immediate, and the nation of Judah later, into exile. In his desperation, he has done all that he thinks might help him keep his power, but sadly, he loses it anyway. Only when he realizes, as Naaman did in our story last week, that he is not the one in control nor can he hold all of the power forever does he finally bring his desperation to God in prayer, admitting his arrogance and folly and humbling himself as he sits in exile in Babylon. Some might say that he finally recognizes his lack of control and helplessness when he hits rock bottom in Babylon. Unlike in

Kings, Manasseh is then returned to his place on the throne of Judah, where his reign ends up much more successful. However, Judah will still fall to Babylon in another 40 years, for some, because of Manasseh's foolishness, sin, and corrupted leadership.

I think of how all of this must have felt to 12-year-old Manasseh when he first took the throne. Was he aware of all of the political and religious pressures around him? Would have a few more years with Hezekiah better prepared him for all that was ahead? How else might we read this story and wonder about the child-kings of the northern and southern kingdoms?

Manasseh is not the only one. Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, is crowned at age 8, while Joash, one of the kings of Samaria before its fall to the Assyrians, was crowned at age 7. I wonder at how the writers of Kings and Chronicles lay down their worst evaluations of these leaders when it seems the odds were stacked against them. How often have we done the same? Yet, I also marvel at God's mercy in the midst of repentance as Manasseh is returned to the throne from exile. How often do we hold hope for repentance and transformation of those with great power?

Closing Prayer: Let us pray: Reigning God, thank you that you are the great shepherd, the gracious King. Thank you for stories of people with great power who seem to do the worst but can still be transformed by your forgiveness. Empower us with your compassion as we watch political leaders nearby and far away that we would follow your example of holding on to hope as well as follow the example of your prophets by speaking out when injustice and evil are all around us. In Jesus name. Amen.