

The Nameless Herald of a Coming Son of David

1 Kings 12:25-13:34

After the traumatizing scene of watching his beloved rabbi executed at the hands of the Romans, followed by the longest, most miserable Sabbath day of his life, John heard, early on that Sunday morning, the terrified voice of Mary Magdalene crying out through gasps for air: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!” John looked across the room at Peter, and then they both sprinted out the door to have a look for themselves. John was younger and in better shape, so he made it to the tomb first. Yes, the stone was rolled away, as she said. Yes, he could see graveclothes lying there, but no corpse, just as she said. Too timid to walk in himself, John waited for Peter to arrive. And when he did, Peter, true to form, took the lead and went inside to see. John followed him in and saw more clearly the grave clothes laid out, as though the body of Jesus had passed right through them. And the cloth that formerly covered his face was folded up and lying by itself. This was not at all the kind of scene that grave robbers would have left. He didn’t yet understand how the Scriptures had foretold this day, but he had seen enough to conclude: *Jesus has been raised from the dead. This changes everything.*

That evening he was gathered with the other disciples. Some women had reported seeing Jesus alive that day, but the mood among the group was still mostly skeptical. And they were terrified that the Jewish authorities were coming for them next. So they stayed inside with their doors locked. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, there he stood. Yes, he looked different than before, the same way someone who has recovered from a terrible illness looks different when you see the color returned to his face, and yet they all had no doubt it was really him. He showed them the nail prints on his hands and the hole in his side from the spear. And when he spoke he said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And at that moment, John knew: *From now on, my life is about one thing.*

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the most significant event in human history. As Christian apologist Bob Stewart said just a couple of weeks ago at a conference at Union, “If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, nothing matters. If he has been raised from the dead, nothing matters more.” That is why, if you confess that he is risen, the logical conclusion to draw from that fact is that your life must be focused on one thing: following Jesus and helping others to do the same. If that is not what characterizes the goal of your life, ask yourself whether you really understand what it means to confess that he is risen. In a world that offers us so many other things to focus on, the temptation will always be to make our lives about something else and then bring Jesus along to play a supporting role. But there is one thing the risen Lord will have none of, and that is making him a supporting character in the movie about your life. If you will have Jesus, then you will have him on his terms, and that means he demands all of you. You will either come to him, confessing with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28), or you will not come to him at all.

In our series through 1-2 Kings, we come now to the beginning of the reign of Jeroboam, the first king of the newly formed northern kingdom of Israel. The ten northern tribes had broken away from the house of David after Solomon’s death and had named Jeroboam king. This story points us to the truth that as a church of Jesus Christ, we are here, for as long a time as God gives us, for

one purpose: to be heralds of our risen and reigning Lord. Let's walk through this story to see how it points us in that direction. The story unfolds in four acts, and we could entitle Act One **1. Fearful Folly (12:25-33).**

Any new king of a newly formed kingdom in the ancient world would want to prioritize making sure his kingdom was secure. So at the beginning of his reign, Jeroboam fortified the city of Shechem and made it his capital, and he also fortified the city of Penuel to protect from invasions from the east. And everything seemed to be going well until he started overthinking. Verse 26 tells us that Jeroboam said to himself in his own heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David." Now why did he assume that? Because he knew that the temple was in Jerusalem, which sat squarely within the southern kingdom's territory. And he knew that the Lord had commanded the people to go there three times a year to worship. So he assumed, "If my subjects, who have broken away from the house of David, repeatedly go up to Jerusalem—the city of David—multiple times per year to worship at the temple built by King Solomon son of David, then at some point their hearts will be drawn back to David's house, and they will once more choose Solomon's son Rehoboam as their king. And when that happens, they will kill me as a traitor!" Jeroboam started overthinking, and it wasn't long until he was ruled by fear.

We must notice here that Jeroboam's fear is entirely in his imagination. To see how unfounded it is, look back one page to 11:37-38. These are the words of the prophet Ahijah to Jeroboam years earlier, announcing to him that he was going to tear ten tribes from the house of David and make Jeroboam king over them: "And I will take you, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel. And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways and do my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you." Jeroboam had a clear word from the Lord that the way to secure his kingdom was to obey the Lord, and the Lord would take care of security. In the intervening time, Jeroboam saw one promise of God come to fulfillment when the kingdom split in two, and he became king in the north. But now he shows no trust in the very clear word that the Lord had given him, and he decides he must seize control for himself.

As a pastor and as a sinner myself, I want to say at this point that when we are governed by fear instead of faith, we will always manifest that by trying to control things we can't control. And that is why fear is the pathway to folly. Don't ever try to be wiser than God. It won't work, and it will only result in making you a fool. So let's note how foolish Jeroboam becomes when he turns away from the promise of God and tries to seize control of his own kingdom's security. He goes to the point of setting up a whole religion for the northern kingdom to rival worship in Jerusalem. It has what any religion needs: its own worship sites, priesthood, and calendar. Instead of making the long journey to Jerusalem, Jeroboam sets up worship sites at Dan in the northern part of his kingdom and at Bethel in the southern part of his kingdom. And he doesn't stop there because he also sets up smaller worship sites around the kingdom called "high places." With new convenient locations for worship, he tells the people they don't have to go to the temple in Jerusalem anymore, in clear violation of Deuteronomy 12. And since he needs priests to manage this new religion, and the Levites are devoted to service in the temple, he drafts priests from all the other tribes of the people, contrary to Leviticus 8-9, which clearly limits the priesthood to Aaron's line. And since his religion needs to have its own festivals, he appoints the 15th day of the eighth

month as a festival, rivaling the Feast of Booths held in Jerusalem on the 15th day of the seventh month.

It is entirely fitting that Jeroboam would choose as the symbol of his new religion golden calves to represent the Lord, in violation of the second commandment. Where have we seen golden calves before? At Mount Sinai, when Moses was gone for forty days, and Aaron let the people run wild. Jeroboam's words at the end of verse 28—"Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt"—directly echo Aaron's words at Mount Sinai when he made golden calves for Israel in Exodus 32:4. Jeroboam's path to security was obedience to the Law of God, and instead, he tried to seize control and did the exact opposite.

I have a coffee mug at home with a picture of John Calvin on it. That's how robustly Protestant I am. On it is written a quote from Calvin that reads, "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols." Jeroboam's actions here illustrate that truth. Verse 26 says it all began with what Jeroboam said in his heart, and verse 33 bookends the passage on the same theme: "He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised *from his own heart*." This new religion is not based on God's revealed truth. It is the creation of man's idolatrous imagination. It is folly driven entirely by fear. And it sets us up for the major showdowns that are about to happen.

Will God stand by and do nothing while the northern kingdom descends into idolatry? No, God has a word for King Jeroboam, which brings us to Act Two:

2. Prophetic Power (13:1-10)

At this point a man of God from Judah enters stage right. This "man of God" is clearly a prophet, and we never catch his name. All we know is where he came from and that he had a word for King Jeroboam from God. So as Jeroboam had convened his people for a grand festival at Bethel, and the sacrificial animals were about to be burned on the altar to the golden calf that stood there as a false symbol of the God of Israel, this man of God crashed their party, interrupting the festivities with a word of judgment.

What was that word of judgment? It was a word declared directly to the altar itself, foretelling of a day when a son would be born to the house of David, and that son would one day come north to Bethel and defile that very altar by burning on it the bones of the rogue priests who served there, symbolizing God's complete rejection of Jeroboam's new religion. That future son of David is even named over three hundred years before his birth, and his name will be Josiah. If you want to read about the fulfillment of this prophetic word, you can read 2 Kings 23:15-20. By declaring this word of a future Davidic king, the man of God from Judah shows that, even though God has severely chastised the house of David by splitting the kingdom as a result of Solomon's sin, nevertheless, the hope for the future of Israel continues to rest on the house of David. God is not done with David's house.

In order to prove the power behind his prophetic word, the man of God declared a sign that his word would indeed come to pass: that very altar he addressed would be split apart, and the ashes in it would scatter. And it happened right there, just as he said, a miraculous work of the Lord. But before it happened Jeroboam tried to intervene, stretching out his hand to command his men to seize the man of God. But when he did so, his hand dried up and stiffened, so that he couldn't

move it. Instead of seizing the man of God, Jeroboam's hand was seized with paralysis. So he begged the man of God to pray for his healing, which he did, and the Lord restored his hand to him. And at that point he tried another tactic. Knowing he couldn't overpower the man of God, Jeroboam tried to tempt him to come to his house, get wined and dined, and then maybe he would be able to smooth things over with him. But the man of God refused, saying the Lord had commanded him not to eat bread or drink water at Bethel and not to return by the way he came. So he exited stage left and started his journey back to Judah.

What is interesting about this man of God is that he doesn't come from the halls of power. He's not a member of the royal court, as the prophet Nathan had been to David. He's an outsider to the power brokers in Israel. In the story he doesn't even have a name. And yet, he is a herald of the word of the Lord, announcing the future coming of a son of David to destroy the idols of Israel. By the same token, as evangelical Christians, we don't own the halls of power in our society. We too are outsiders. Our names will not be remembered in this world three or four generations after we die. If you were to count up all the faithful, convictional, evangelical Christians who write for the *New York Times*, who teach at ivy league universities, and who own our most profitable companies, you would probably have enough fingers on one hand to count them. And yet, we are heralds of a Son of David who has been raised from the dead, who reigns at the right hand of God, and who is going to come one day to destroy the idols of this world. The Word of the Lord that we proclaim to this world is true, and it carries far more power than all the world's media outlets, universities and international corporations combined. Whether or not we walk in the halls of power in this world, the message we proclaim is what really matters.

So it would seem at this point that we could wrap up this story and move on, looking ahead to the day when King Josiah would arrive. But the author is not finished yet. We still have two more acts to go. Act Three introduces a twist in the plot, and we could entitle it:

3. Marred Messenger (13:11-32)

At this point a new character enters, and it's another one who doesn't have a name: the old prophet from Bethel. To keep them straight in our minds, let's remember the "man of God" is the prophet from Judah, and "the old prophet" is the one who lives at Bethel. Notice a strange twist in the story as we read verses 11-19: "Now an old prophet lived in Bethel. And his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. They also told to their father the words that he had spoken to the king. And their father said to them, 'Which way did he go?' And his sons showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone. And he said to his sons, 'Saddle the donkey for me.' So they saddled the donkey for him and he mounted it. And he went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak. And he said to him, 'Are you the man of God who came from Judah?' And he said, 'I am.' Then he said to him, 'Come home with me and eat bread.' And he said, 'I may not return with you, or go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place, for it was said to me by the word of the Lord, 'You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came.'" And he said to him, 'I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, "Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But he lied to him. So he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water." Why would the old prophet lie and deceive the man of God? The text doesn't say, but the reading that makes the most sense to me is that the prophet is testing the man of God to see if his message is true. Notice that the old prophet who lives at Bethel, the one who should have been at

Jeroboam's festival denouncing his new religion, was not there. His sons had to tell him about what happened. Apparently, he had become a compromised prophet, unwilling to challenge the idolatry in his own backyard. So when he heard about a man of God from Judah who did that very thing, he wanted to know if this man and his message were for real. So he devised a test and lied about a message from an angel giving the man of God permission to come to his house to eat.

What was the man of God from Judah thinking? Why did he agree to go? Apparently, he was impressed by the stature of the older prophet and the news of an angelic messenger. Let this passage be a warning to us all to test the spirits to see if they are from God, as 1 John 4:1 tells us. In the words of commentator Peter Leithart, "Always, the church's greatest tests come not from kings who call for imprisonment and torture; Christians relish martyrdom. The great tests arise from lying prophets, from wolfish bishops and priests, pastors and preachers." The man of God knew what God had said, but he allowed a rival word to contradict what he knew to be the word of God. He had a failure of faith, and he disobeyed the very clear word of God. The messenger of God to King Jeroboam was a marred messenger.

And he paid a price for his sin. Let's continue reading verses 20-25: "And as they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back. And he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, 'Thus says the Lord, "Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord and have not kept the command that the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back and have eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, 'Eat no bread and drink no water,' your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers.'" And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back. And as he went away a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it; the lion also stood beside the body. And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown in the road and the lion standing by the body. And they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived." The marred messenger became a mauled messenger. As God declared to him through the old prophet, his body did not make it back home. A lion killed him on the road. But then what? The lion stood there contentedly beside the mauled body and the live donkey. Lions don't do that, folks. A lion kills to eat the flesh of its victim. And yet, there stood the lion, eating the flesh of neither man nor donkey, showing that this action was a miraculous work, the supernatural judgment of God against the disobedient man of God.

What's the point of all this? I think we see that come out in verses 26-32: "And when the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, 'It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the Lord; therefore the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word that the Lord spoke to him.' And he said to his sons, 'Saddle the donkey for me.' And they saddled it. And he went and found his body thrown in the road, and the donkey and the lion standing beside the body. The lion had not eaten the body or torn the donkey. And the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him. And he laid the body in his own grave. And they mourned over him, saying, 'Alas, my brother!' And after he had buried him, he said to his sons, 'When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones. For the saying that he called out by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria shall surely

come to pass.” Why is the old prophet honoring and mourning the very man he deceived, causing his death? Because, ironically, this death by lion proved that the man of God was a true messenger of the Lord. You might assume that the man of God failed the old prophet’s test. In one sense, he did. He disobeyed the Lord’s word. But when, in response to his disobedience, the Lord declared a word of judgment through the old prophet, and when that word was miraculously fulfilled through a lion that mauls without eating the flesh, it showed the old prophet that yes, this man of God spoke the truth when he said the Lord told him not to eat or drink in Bethel. And if he spoke the truth about that, guess what: he also spoke the truth about Jeroboam’s altar. At this point, the compromised prophet who didn’t have the conviction to confront King Jeroboam knows without any doubt that Jeroboam’s false religion is doomed, and he throws in his lot with the man of God from Judah. He even wants his bones laid next to this man of God when he dies. The man of God was a marred messenger, to be sure. But he spoke the truth.

What we see from this story is that God delivers his infallible Word through fallible people. The man of God is a flawed man, one who fails to obey the very Word he proclaims. And yet, in spite of his failure, the Word of the Lord remains the driving power in this story. It’s as though the Word of God stands above the failures and fallibility of those who proclaim it. And when you look at the church today, the same is true. We have a word to proclaim to this world, a word about a coming Son of David, and that word is absolutely, infallibly true. But we ourselves are flawed people, marred messengers, who often fail to live up to the very message we proclaim. Pastoral scandals abound. “Church hurt” is real. Maybe some are even in this room today because this is the one Sunday in a year when you dare to darken the doors of a church, but you avoid it like the plague the rest of the year because of some bad experience you had with Christians in the past. If the failures of God’s preachers and God’s people have left you hurt and confused, I am genuinely sorry for that. I know that is difficult to process. But I also want to say to you today that marred messengers do not detract in any way from the truth of the gospel they proclaim. This man of God spoke the truth, even though he didn’t live up to it himself. The same is true for the church of Jesus Christ today, warts and all. You see, the messenger is not the point. We never even learn the man of God’s name. As messengers, this story is not about us, but about the Word we proclaim to a lost world about a risen Son of David who will come one day, destroy the idols of this world, and restore the true Israel, a people from every corner of the earth.

Act Three comes to a close with the old prophet mourning the marred, mauled messenger. So now, to complete the story, we must come back once more to where we started, and that’s with Jeroboam in Act Four. We could entitle this act:

4. Settled Sin (13:33-34)

How did Jeroboam respond to this ordeal? Verse 33 reads, “After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places.” A prophet of the Lord had declared judgment on his altar, had given a sign of that judgment by splitting the altar in two by the power of God, spilling its ashes everywhere, and then when Jeroboam tried to stop him, his own hand dried up and stiffened until this same man of God prayed for his healing. And the result? Jeroboam doubled down in his sin. He rebuilt the altar, appointed more priests for his new religion, and promoted false worship all the more. What more could God have done to warn him? Hardened in his sin, he went full steam ahead into more of it.

Here's the ironic result of Jeroboam's hardening, in verse 34: "And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth." The very thing he feared, the loss of his kingdom, is what he made a foregone conclusion by leading the northern kingdom into entrenched false worship. The very thing he did out of fear to try to exercise control is what led to the ultimate fulfillment of the very thing he feared in the future destruction of his house, and we will see how that unfolds in later passages.

So, as we take a step back and look at this story as a whole, let's ask the question: what did the man of God actually accomplish? In one sense, he accomplished nothing. His warning went unheeded, the idolatry in Israel only grew worse, and the man of God didn't even make it back to Judah alive. But did he fail? No, not at all. Second Kings 23:15-20 narrates what happened over 300 years later in precise fulfillment of what he had foretold, even down to the name of King Josiah. The man of God accomplished nothing in his own day, but the Word of God still ran its course to fulfillment. He was merely a herald, one who proclaimed a coming Son of David, for as long as he was on the stage. He played his role, and then he exited stage left.

It seems to me that on this Easter Sunday, reflecting on this man of God from Judah gives us insight into our part in the story of Jesus. Like the man of God, are we outsiders to the institutions of power in our society? Yes. Like the man of God, are we flawed people who sometimes fail to live up to the very message we proclaim? Yes. Like the man of God, does our proclamation of a coming Son of David often fall on deaf ears? Yes. For all these reasons and more, we could be tempted toward discouragement in the mission Christ has given us. We could so easily succumb to cravings to do more with our lives and focus on building our own personal kingdoms where, we imagine, our names will actually be remembered after we're gone.

And yet, despite our outsider status, our failures, and the seeming hardness of the world to our message, the Word of God will run its course to fulfillment. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and that changes everything. He has commissioned us to make disciples in all the world, and that means our lives are primarily about one thing. This story is not about us. Our role is to be heralds of our coming King for as long a time as he gives us, and then to exit stage left.

In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." How in the world is John the Baptist greater than all who came before him? He never performed any miracles like Elijah, never saw God on a mountain like Moses, never toppled giants like David. What did John the Baptist do that was greater than them all? He saw Jesus and pointed people directly to him. The Messiah that Moses, David, and Elijah only saw in the distant future, he saw with his own eyes, and with greater clarity than anyone before him proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" And that made him greater than all who came before. So how then can the least in the kingdom of heaven be even greater than John? Because we who belong to the kingdom that has now come see Jesus Christ even more clearly than John did: we see him risen from the dead. On this side of the cross, the empty tomb, and Pentecost, we herald King Jesus with even greater clarity than John ever knew. That is true greatness. That, and that alone, is worth giving your whole life to. Because if Jesus is not raised from the dead, nothing else matters. If he is raised from the dead—and he is—then nothing matters more. Amen.