

March 29, 2023, Lenten Midweek 6

Our Last Hope: Josiah

2 Chronicles 34:1–3; 35:20–27

Psalms 30; Revelation 21:1–6b; Luke 23:26–31

Hymns: *LSB* 436, 532

This is our final Lenten midweek service, and we turn to Josiah, the last of the good kings of Judah. Over the previous fifty-seven years, Judah had suffered under two of the worst kings she ever had. The first was Manasseh, who reigned fifty-five years and was succeeded by his son Amon for two years. He was assassinated, and Josiah was made king.

Fifty-seven years of worshiping idols and an ever-weakening kingdom took its toll on Judah. Imagine if since 1966 our nation had been led by persecutors of Christianity. The faithful remnant remained, but it was weak. Several generations had passed without regular celebration of festivals and teaching of Torah; they were accustomed to worshiping the Baals and Asheroth. The temple was again in disrepair; this always accompanied long periods of faithlessness.

At this time, the boy Josiah, just eight years old, began to reign. ***“He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father”*** (34:2). Even as a boy of sixteen, he sought the God of David. Josiah’s reign began in the chaos of an assassination and foreign enemies on every side. Could Josiah stave off the destruction of Judah and lead the people back into glory? It sure seemed that he was the last hope of Judah.

At the age of twenty-six, Josiah began to repair the house of the Lord again, as his faithful ancestors had done. As the carpenters and builders were working, amid the clutter, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law, the Torah of Moses. This book, more precious than all the money that was found in the temple, was brought to King Josiah.

And so it was that the people of Judah were reminded of the great promises and curses of the Mosaic covenant. There was a renewal of faith as all the people, great and small, heard the words of the Book of the Covenant. There was repentance and turning away from idols. There was a renewal of the covenant as Josiah kept a Passover in Jerusalem.

It is written that *“no Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet”* (35:18), even under Solomon and Hezekiah. But hanging over the reign of King Josiah was the word of the prophetess Huldah, who had prophesied impending disaster, only delayed until the death of Josiah.

Not long after this, Josiah, the king who found God’s Word, was confronted with a very worldly problem. Pharaoh Neco of Egypt was marching his army north through Judah in order to fight further north at the Euphrates River, probably against the newly expansionistic Babylon. We don’t know exactly why Josiah opposed it, but there are many possible reasons. It’s unsettling for any government to have foreign troops travel through its land.

Whatever the motivation, Josiah was disturbed and went out with an army to meet Neco. Remember, Neco was not intending to fight Judah. He was headed north to fight at Carchemish. In fact, Neco apparently had the command of God for this mission and declared as much to Josiah. In a remarkable exchange, Neco said, *“Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you”* (35:21).

The Bible actually tells us that a foreign king spoke words “*from the mouth of God*” (35:22).

Nevertheless, King Josiah couldn't resist interfering in international politics and was determined to fight. So, Josiah was found opposed to God's Word, spoken by Neco, one of the most unlikely prophets of Scripture. It is clear that Josiah knew he was doing wrong, because he did not call on God and go into battle leading his forces. Instead, he disguised himself, as wicked king Ahab of Israel had done before. He was trying to oppose Egypt without having to do so publicly.

But King Josiah was not disguised from God, and an arrow hit and mortally wounded him. The arrow, a long-range weapon, was not aimed at the king, but found him by God's will. And so, the words of the prophet Neco were fulfilled as King Josiah was destroyed in the valley of Megiddo.

Thus, the last hope of Judah had fallen in an unnecessary war with a king acting by God's command. Josiah's son reigned in his place for only three months until the Egyptians installed a puppet king. Soon Babylon invaded and set up its puppet kings.

One thing led to another, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, the chosen people exiled. The prophecies of Huldah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were fulfilled.

While this future was unknown, it was clear at Josiah's death that the kingdom of Judah would never be the same. The old days were gone, and foreigners would have the upper hand in the land of David. Thus, the death of Josiah was a time of weeping and lamentation. Weeping for a good king whose death was untimely. Weeping for a lost nation whose future was certainly a shadow of her past. This weeping would continue for at least two hundred years. With the lament of Jeremiah and others by men and women singing, the Judeans continued to mourn the death of their king and his kingdom.

King Josiah was a good king, truly a great king. But even his righteous repentance and sacrifices were unable to stave off the destruction of the kingdom. After all, what good is a king if he can only give his people peace until his death and then comes the end? What hope is there when all that a man works for is passed on to the next generation, who sees its destruction?

One generation follows another, and this pattern continues. So it was that the Son of Josiah came to a wicked and sinful generation. The kingdom of God was at hand, but there was much opposition to it. The faithful had been prepared by the prophet John. He called the people of God to repentance in the Judean wilderness by the Jordan. So, the Son of God brought out the Torah and Prophets while teaching in the temple, synagogues, and countryside.

Moreover, the Son of David suffered according to the Word of God. Jesus often taught that the Son of Man must suffer and die and be raised again. So, the Son of David entered Jerusalem when he knew that it meant certain death. It wasn't a matter of divine foreknowledge. His disciples noted closely that the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees had been eager to stone him for months. Jesus wasn't going for a coronation but an assassination!

Yet Jesus would not be dissuaded. The Son of Josiah would not disguise himself or hide from the enemy. He taught openly in the temple. He confronted false teachers wherever they opposed God's Word.

It was instead his enemies who sought the cover of darkness to hide their evil deeds. Out of fear of the crowds, the chief priests took Jesus into custody in the dead of night. By morning, the Son of God was stripped of his clothes and hung bare under the sign, which read, “This is the King of the Judeans.”

While the crowds called for blood, the faithful women wept and lamented, as Luke recorded. On Sunday morning, John tells of Mary Magdalene weeping at the empty tomb for her deceased Lord and his vanished body. Fear gripped this would-be king’s followers. He was the one they had hoped would redeem Israel. Now he was dead, and the future was bleak indeed. It would be forty years later, but their Lord had told them that Jerusalem and the temple therein would be destroyed. The nation they loved would once more be a relic of past glory.

So it was that the last hope for Israel hung on a cross. Not shot accidentally by archers but knowingly nailed to the tree. The sign proclaimed what their hearts refused to believe: that Jesus is the king of the Judeans.

And the world rejoiced at the death of this innocent man. Wicked men had opposed God's Word and violent men took the kingdom by force. Meanwhile, his followers wept and lamented.

But this is not the end, for the Son of Josiah has turned our mourning into joy.

What Jesus knew, but even the disciples and the women could not believe, was that the path to an eternal kingdom went through the cross. Only by suffering death could death be overcome. With our sins forgiven, we can follow our Savior into life, where weeping is no more, and sorrow is turned to dancing.

The reign of this Son of David was incredibly short by earthly standards. He was marked for death, already sentenced when he was crowned. But there would be no successor, because Jesus is the only king to succeed himself at death. So, we no longer mourn King Josiah; we do not mourn the destruction of the temple or Jerusalem, whether the first or second time. Those we do not need! Our King lives eternally, and his kingdom is all around us. In him, in our resurrected Lord, we have all the hope we will ever need.

Whether devils fill Armageddon or fear grips our hearts, we need only to look to the cross. There we see the power of God and his King, our Lord and Savior.

When we turn to the cross, our sorrow is turned to joy because the eternal King says, *“Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”* For a little while, we sorrowed, but in Jesus’ resurrection our sorrow has turned to joy. *“No one will take your joy from you”* through the ever-reigning King Jesus, the Son of Josiah, the Son of David (John 16:24, 22).

Amen