

And the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. And Solomon lay with his fathers and was buried in the City of David his father. And Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.

And Rehoboam came to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. And it happened when Jeroboam son of Nebat heard, he was still in Egypt where he had fled from King Solomon, and Jeroboam had stayed in Egypt, that they sent and called to him, and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and spoke to Rehoboam, saying, “Your father made our yoke heavy, and you, now lighten the hard labor of your father and his heavy yoke that he put on us, that we may serve you.”

And he said to them, “Go off another three days and come back to me,” and the people went off. And King Rehoboam took counsel with the elders who stood in the service of his father while he was alive, saying, “How do you counsel to respond to this people?”

And they spoke to him, saying, “If today you will be a servant to this people and serve them and answer them and speak good words to them, they will be servants to you always.”

And he forsook the counsel of the elders that they had given him and took counsel with the young men with whom he had grown up, who stood in his service. And he said to them, “What do you counsel that we should respond to this people that has spoken to me, saying, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?’” And the young men with whom he had grown up spoke to him, saying, “Thus shall you say to these people who have spoken to you, saying, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, and you, lighten it for us.’ Thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. And now, my father burdened you with a heavy yoke, and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips, and I will scourge you with scorpions.’”

And Jeroboam, and all the people with him, came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, “Return to me on the third day.”

And the king answered the people harshly and forsook the counsel of the elders that they had given him. And he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips and I will scourge you with scorpions.”

And the king did not hearken to the people, for it was brought about by the LORD in order to fulfill His word that the LORD had spoken through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

And all Israel saw that the king had not hearkened to them, and the people responded to the king, saying, “We have no share in David nor an estate in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! See to your house, O David!” And Israel went to their tents. As to the Israelites dwelling in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam was king over them.

And Jeroboam rebuilt Shechem in the high country of Ephraim and dwelled in it. And he went out from there and rebuilt Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David, if this people go up to do sacrifices in the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn back to their master, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and turn back to Rehoboam king of Judah.”

And the king took counsel and made two golden calves and said to the people, “Enough for you to go up to Jerusalem! Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” And he placed one in Bethel and the other he set in Dan.

Our story from scripture for this morning concerns a Divided Household, or rather a Divided Kingdom, in reference to the rule of Solomon’s son and successor, Rehoboam.

The advice he received was mixed. Some was potentially helpful, some was devastatingly harmful. His choice, unfortunately, reflected more of the worst of himself than the best that the advice could have wrought.

The backdrop of this political situation is less complicated than it might sound. King David fathered Solomon, who himself became King and famously built the first Temple in Jerusalem. (All this takes place approximately 950 B.C.) Yet Solomon was also widely known for going after false gods as well as many other foreign women; according to legend he had 300 wives and 700 concubines. Affording this incredibly profligate lifestyle led to placing heavy burdens upon the populace to supply crops, animals, building materials and more.

All these debts, along with the difficulties of a historic rivalry between the northern and southern tribes of Israel, were passed along to Solomon's son, Rehoboam. He continued favoring certain cities and tribal affiliations over others. He also continued the tradition of building worship sites ("high places") for the gods of his many foreign wives. He may have been doomed from the start, but his attitude surely did not help things one bit.

Here's a tip about reading the Bible. It's very easy to get confused or sidetracked as you read through scripture because there are so many layers of tradition, edits and re-writes that took place before anything resembling a final composition took place. There are prophecies and predictions that seem to forecast future happenings that were actually written after the fact, but were later 'back-dated' as to appear to be prophecies. So it is that much of the history of the Bible is written with such a compellingly accurate prophetic slant.

This is one reason it's so difficult to read the Bible and follow its great underlying themes. The great themes of the Bible don't have to do with chronology, timelines or family lineages.

Rather, the great themes of the Bible have to do with faithfulness, generosity, hope- and perhaps the best word for today; character.

Our lesson for today, the takeaway of our story, is that Rehoboam was a man of questionable character, to put it nicely. When it was his turn to lead his people, he first consulted his father's advisors. They advised him to be 'a servant to his people and serve them and answer them and speak good words to them, and they would be servants to him always.' That sounds like both good advice and good governance to me.

But Rehoboam wasn't happy with this; somehow it didn't fit with his character and he called in new



advisors, old buddies of his, for them to weigh in on his strategy for governance. Their words contrast sharply with what he heard before. "Thus shall you say to them, my father burdened you with a heavy yoke, and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips, and I will scourge you with scorpions."

He didn't have to say this, but he did. He didn't have to choose this course, but he did. If there was a test of upright

character for Rehoboam; for justice, equity and fairness in governance, he failed it. And the history of his people bear witness to this decision; it didn't go well.

So this sermon is a study in character and bearing witness to the best of what God wants and expects out of us. It's about who we take advice from; how we judge it, receive it, test it and determine the best and right way to move forward with the advice we're given.

So, first, about character. I have a story to share about this: it's a little different, but it fits the theme of personal character in a unique and quirky way. (Interpretive discernment)

It's a story about Dr. Bruce Metzger, Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, General Editor of the New Standard Revised Bible, an individual with what many described as a 'perfect memory', a knowledge of nearly a dozen ancient languages, and surely the most humble and deferential person you could ever meet. He passed away in 2007, but stories about him live on.

There were lots of stories told about him at Princeton Seminary. Most of them were meant to be funny, and we always wondered which, if any of them, were really true, that they really happened that way.

Far and away the most commonly told and best known story was one I heard when I first arrived at the seminary in 1979. It is the story of Dr. Metzger and the squirrel.

Again, Dr. Metzger was a bit quirky and off in his own little world; but he also knew so many things that no one else would ever think of knowing and constantly volunteered his knowledge, no matter what the occasion.

So here is the story as I first heard it. Dr. Metzger and a student are walking across the Princeton Seminary campus, which is filled with very old, tall oak trees. As they are strolling past a tree, a squirrel overhead jumps from one branch to another, but misses. The squirrel falls from the tree, plopl!, dead,

right in front of them. Dr. Metzger looks at the dead squirrel; the student looks at the squirrel; they look at each other. And Dr. Metzger says, "I know the Greek word for squirrel."

End of story. That's version one.

Hit rewind; here's another version of the story that made the rounds, too.

Dr. Metzger and a student are walking across the Princeton Seminary campus, filled with old, tall oak trees. As they are strolling past a tree, a squirrel overhead jumps from one branch to another, but misses. The squirrel falls from the tree, plop!, dead, right in front of them. Dr. Metzger looks at the dead squirrel; the student looks at the squirrel; they look at each other. And Dr. Metzger says, "The Greek word for squirrel is *skiouros*; a compound term made up of the words 'skia', shadow, and 'oura', tail. A squirrel is one said to live in "the shadow of its tail."

Hit rewind once more. One more version of the story for you....

Dr. Metzger and a student are walking across the Princeton Seminary campus, filled with old, tall oak trees. As they are strolling past a tree, a squirrel overhead jumps from one branch to another, but misses. The squirrel falls from the tree, plop!, dead, right in front of them. Dr. Metzger looks at the dead squirrel; the student looks at the squirrel, they look at each other. And Dr. Metzger says, "Oh, poor thing!"

Now each of these accounts reveals something of the character of Dr. Metzger, that he was supremely intelligent, quick of mind, witty, and also compassionate.

All of these stories *could* be true, in that they reveal something true about Dr. Metzger. The story that is most true about him (that has been verified by other sources, as well) is the last story. "Oh, poor thing" - reveals his compassionate character, his most true & natural self.

This is most who he was, and how he reacted when confronted with the surprise of a squirrel expired at his feet.

Now, back to our story for the day. At the beginning of his reign, Rehoboam was confronted, not by a dead squirrel, but with a decision about governance. He sought the best advice available, policy that would resonate with who he was and the image he wanted to impress upon his people. His decision did in fact reflect who he was, from the inside out. Again, it did not go well. Poor character combined with poor advice does not go well.

Advice is a funny thing. We hear what we want to hear, not necessarily what is the best for us, or others. Bad results borne out of bad advice reflect the character of the giver AND the recipient. But not all advice is bad advice.... And a sermon should be uplifting, shouldn't it? So here's something else...

In a springtime article in the New York Times, the writer David Pogue published a piece titled ***The Best Advice You've Ever Received (and are willing to pass on.)*** The words he shares are reflections of how advice can meet fertile ground in the recipient, resonating to make a positive difference in living.

I'll share just a few to give you a sense of what he's talking about with words of wisdom for almost any life situation.

"You've never seen a cat skeleton in a tree, have you?" When one subscriber's cat couldn't get down from a tree, her grandmother reassured her with those words, predicting (correctly) that the cat would come down on his own. "This advice made me realize that, sometimes, you need to shift your perception of a problem to see a solution."

"Don't pickle things." That line, brought to you by a reader's great-grandmother, means: If you have something special, use it now. "Serve daily meals on your good china. Wash your hands with the luxurious soap you received as a housewarming gift. Drink that bottle of amazing wine right away. Don't save things for future use — because who knows what the future looks like?"

A couple more.

"Take a breath." One subscriber heard this from a yoga teacher ("at a corporate retreat about which I remember nothing else"). It wasn't a yoga instruction; it was a suggestion to pause at stressful moments, to avoid saying or doing something regrettable. "I use this advice every day," she wrote. "It has preserved peace, calmed me, and made me appear smarter than I am."

"Just be a gentleman." Another subscriber admits that this advice "may sound corny." But that guidance came from his mother at a heightened emotional moment: as she dropped him off at college shortly after his father had died. "It means not taking advantage of other people and trying to adhere to your moral values," he wrote. "Her advice has kept me from doing some bad things and encouraged me to do what is right. Best advice ever."

And finally, a grab bag of wise words, one liners that don't need further explication. If the advice fits, wear it.

- "Boyfriends come and boyfriends go, but SAT scores are forever."
- "When you see a ball on the road, make a full stop. There's usually a kid running right behind it."
- "You don't always have to have the last word."
- "The best advice at a rocky time in life: Walk slowly and drink lots of water."

The key to all of these, as I've found after pondering them for a week, is that they are not self-centered, but take a long-range view. They are borne of experience and have passed the test of time.

They all share in their origins an openness, a welcome for something new, unexpected, not scripted or predetermined.

A religious person might say that the advice fits the God-shaped hole in every life that nothing else will finally fit.

So, here's one piece of advice that might fit every situation in life. It could have been helpful, even for Rehoboam...

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”
Do that, and all will be well. Amen.