**Power and Responsibility**

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. That is what today’s readings bring to mind for me.

Last week we talked about the wisdom of Solomon. Unfortunately, Solomon – even with all that wisdom from God – wandered away from the path God desired for him. Like his father before him, Solomon began to take his success for granted, and followed the ways of the world.

God challenges Solomon in his sin. Solomon is told that his descendants will not have the full kingdom of Israel. They will keep one tribe, Judah, so that God’s promise to David is fulfilled, but the rest will go to Jeroboam. How does Solomon react? No longer does he react with humility and wisdom. Solomon tries to kill Jeroboam.

Once again we have a twist in God’s story. The wise one, the one who is renowned as a great king, a wise and eloquent writer, builder of fine palaces and cities, is revealed to be a harsh ruler, who taxed heavily and conscripted everyone to hard labor in order to achieve his success. Solomon had moved from bringing glory to God to seeking glory for himself. The consequences for the people were tremendous.

Upon the death of Solomon, the people turned to the son who succeeded him, Rehoboam. The people were led by Jeroboam, the man whom God had told Solomon would get the lion’s share of the kingdom. Yet Jeroboam comes leading the people with a reasonable request: Give us a break! Make our lives easier.

Rehoboam seeks advice. He asks the elders. He asks the younger folk. The one source to which he doesn’t turn is God. In Rehoboam’s response to the people you can hear his insecurity. “You thought my Dad was tough – just wait. I am ten times tougher than dear old Dad!” Only he wasn’t. And even if he had been, this was not the way to gain the people’s trust and loyalty, as the elders had well known.

The people walk away. See ya! Look after your own house, Judah. You and Benjamin are on your own. We have a fine young man here in Jereboam. He seems to understand us. See ya!

However it turns out that Jereboam had his own problems – his own insecurity. To unite the people, David and Solomon had focused worship of God in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in Rehoboam’s territory. Jeroboam worried about what might happen if his people went to Jerusalem to worship. Like Rehoboam, Jeroboam sought advice…and just like Rehoboam, he didn’t seek advice from God. ‘I’ve got it! I will build places of worship here. We are rural folk. Instead of angels, I will make magnificent golden calves, not one but two! I will put them in two locations so people don’t have to travel so far to worship. I will make it easy for them, and they will appreciate me.

Out of the frying pan, and into the fire.

Power, of any sort, comes with tremendous responsibility. Responsible power is not about maintaining one’s position no matter what the cost. It is not about putting other people in their place because we can. Neither is it about ignoring the realities of life, the troubles and sinfulness, just to make life easier for ourselves. Each of these kings, in his own way, set the stage for the future sufferings of the nations they had been called to serve by the way they answered the challenges of their time. Both failed because they were more concerned about their own power and glory than about serving God.

*We* are each given power through the gift of Jesus Christ. It may not seem that way sometimes. We may feel helpless against the powers which surround us. We may struggle for money or even for food. We may feel like no one would listen to us, like no one *does* listen to us. We see others who seem like they have it all. There are people for whom all seems to come easily, for whom power comes easily. When we feel this way, we can look two ways. First, we can look at Rehoboam and Jereboam, but we should notice that all their early power didn’t prove to be successful. Then there are other examples, more positive ones.

We start by looking to Jesus Christ. Jesus was the Servant Leader. Jesus was committed to serving God. In serving God, Jesus Christ brought new life to us. Through Christ’s life of responsible power, the gift of grace in the forgiveness of our sins comes to us. Our response is repentance and renewed dedication to serving God.

It is hard, sometimes, for us to imagine living in the example of Christ. Christ was perfect. We are not. So let’s look at one more example a little more on our level.

Back in the 1960’s there was a popular and successful football quarterback at Wake Forest University. It was a turbulent time on many college campuses, especially in the South. Integration was an issue – among classmates and within sports. In 1962 Darryl Hill became the first black athlete in the ACC Conference when he enrolled at the University of Maryland. He was heckled at every away game including during the warm-up to the game at Wake Forest. The quarterback of the Wake Forest team watched across the field as the young black athlete ignored the ugly taunts which the Wake Forest students were yelling. The quarterback walked across the field toward Darryl Hill. I am sure Mr. Hill wondered what this opposing quarterback was going to say. He probably had heard just about everything. What I doubt he expected to hear was the apology which came from the young quarterback. The Wake Forest player then put his arm around Mr. Hill’s shoulders and walked him across the field to face the Wake Forest students. The heckling continued for a bit as they walked across the field. Then it slowed to a hush as the two young men stood together confronting the crowd.

Few people remember who won the game that day. Many remember this story. They remember that this young quarterback risked his standing in his own community to do something that would bring God glory. They remember that he went out of his way to care for another. They remember that he acted in a way that spoke louder than words to challenge the prevailing attitude of the times, but that he did so in a way that did not slander or abuse those whose attitudes he was challenging.

If this were a fairy tale, the young quarterback would have gone on to a fabulous professional career. But this was real life. This young man graduated from Wake Forest after a distinguished career, but struggled to make it into professional football. Although he was the leading rusher in all college football in his senior year in college, he was not drafted because he was considered “too small and too slow.” He made it to professional football, but not as a quarterback. After less than five years of playing pro ball, however, Brian Piccolo was diagnosed with embryonal cell carcinoma and died at the age of 26. You might remember the powerful movie made of his life, Brian’s Song.

What kind of power did Brian Piccolo have? Certainly not the power of a king or politician, we might think. Brian Piccolo doesn’t seem to have worried about having power or gaining power. He was content to use what power he did have in a positive way, to live responsibly and faithfully right where he was.

Brian Piccolo had power because he relied on God, and because he sought to bring glory to God. This power is the same power which God offered to the family of David, and which God offers to us. It is the power of being a child of God, a little one through whom God acts and loves. It is not the power of intimidation or coercion. It is the power of love, God’s own power of righteousness and justice. In God’s power none of us is “too small or too slow,” too young or too old, too rich or too poor, too healthy or too ill for God’s work.

As Jesus told his disciples – and us – we receive the gift of God’s grace as a little child, full of potential, when we rely on God’s strength and give glory to God.

Learn from the mistakes of Rehoboam and Jereboam. Learn from the loving example of Jesus Christ. Learn from Brian Piccolo. Lean on God, no matter what your circumstances, and use whatever power you have to bring glory to God. Live in God’s love!