

# Words

Dr. Bruce Hedgepeth



2 Kings 22:1-3, 8-13, 23:1-3

## I. KID WORDS

I was probably a bit of a strange kid. I didn't realize it at the time. It seemed perfectly normal to me, but looking back at my fascination with sports and how I read everything I could find and then re-read it and then studied it some more, was probably a bit unusual. I was engrossed in reading and learning about whatever season was next: football or basketball or baseball. And it wasn't just words about my favorite team that grabbed my attention. I was interested in just about every player on every team in the league.

I know it's hard to imagine it now, but in order to access those words about all the players on all the teams my parents had to buy me books: the Pro Football Digest; or the Major League Baseball Prospectus; or the Sporting News NBA Preview. Those were the days before smart phones, before the internet, even before home computers, so if you wanted to read words about an upcoming sports season you had to find them in a newspaper or magazine or in the kinds of books my parents bought me.

The reason I liked to get preview books for every sport is that they gave an overview of the entire league. In the Chicago Tribune, my hometown newspaper, you could read about the Cubs or the White Sox or the Bears or the Bulls, but you didn't get information about other teams. In a magazine, like Sports Illustrated, you got some information on every team, but you didn't get the whole picture. I wanted to read all the words. I wanted to memorize all the stats.

That's when I got to be Miami Dolphins fan, even though I grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago: I was captivated by the backfield of Larry Czonka and Mercury Morris and Jim Kiick; by the No Name Defense led by Nick Buoniconti, Bill Stanfill and Jake Scott; and by Bob Griese throwing touchdowns to Paul Warfield as the Dolphins built their team to the perfection of a 17-0 season in 1972.

So I spent a chunk of my childhood reading words about sports and memorizing statistics about players from every team in the league. Like I said, it was probably a bit unusual, but it seemed perfectly normal to me at the time. This morning we turn our attention to a biblical character who spent most of his childhood doing something that's even more unusual than studying books about sports: he was in charge of a country.

When we are introduced to Josiah in the first few verses of 2 Kings 22, we find out that he became king of Judah when he was 8 years old. The year was 639 B.C. and when young King Josiah took the throne in Jerusalem, he was following in the footsteps of whole series of really bad kings. If you read through the chapters leading up to our text for today, you will find that time after time the scripture says that King so-and-so did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Usually that meant allowing or even encouraging God's covenant people to worship other gods. Often it meant being unjust to the poor and the needy. Frequently it meant ignoring the words of the prophets whom the Lord sent to speak his word to his people.

But we find out in the very first paragraph of our text that King Josiah was different. Verse 2 tells us: "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left." So let's look a little

**“I believed from my childhood in church that the scriptures are the right place to look when you are asking questions about the meaning and purpose of life.”**

closer at what it was that made young Josiah the finest king that Judah had seen since David...

## II. WORD POWER

According to the scripture we read, the defining moment for King Josiah came in the eighteenth year of his reign. That year was 621 B.C. and Josiah was about 26 years old when he initiated a project to repair the temple in Jerusalem. During the preparations for that restoration, workers found a scroll and brought it to Hilkiah the high priest. When the king's secretary, Shaphan, went to the temple to arrange with the high priest to pay the workers to do the repairs, Hilkiah reported to the secretary that the book of the law had been found in the temple.

Reading between the lines of these verses, that means it was noteworthy that they had recovered a scroll that contained the book of the law. In other words, even the high priest Hilkiah had not previously seen the law God had given to his covenant people in days of Moses. Many biblical scholars believe that the book of the law was a scroll of our Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

So, having received the Deuteronomy scroll from the high priest, the king's secretary takes the book and reads it. Judging from Shaphan's reaction, he thought what he read was pretty important. We can tell because when Shaphan reports to King Josiah on making arrangements to pay the workers for the temple repairs, he also tells the king about the discovery of the scroll. Listen again to 2 Kings 22:10: "Shaphan the secretary informed the king, 'The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.' Shaphan then read it aloud to the king."

I don't want us to miss the king's reaction to the words Shaphan read. We find it beginning in verse 11:

*When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king's servant Asaiah saying, "Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."*

So what was it that Shaphan read that was so upsetting to King Josiah? We don't know for sure, but if biblical scholars are correct and it was a scroll of the book of Deuteronomy, the passage could have been one like Deuteronomy 6:13-15, which reads:

*The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are around you, because the Lord your God is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth.*

Not surprisingly, words like that had a huge impact on the king: he tore his clothes as a sign of distress, even mourning. Josiah recognized that he and his people and their ancestors before them had forsaken the one true God and had worshipped the gods of the pagan peoples in the land. The king realized that they deserved God's punishment.

This is the point in the story that shows most clearly why the Bible regards Josiah as the finest king since David. Not only was he moved to penitence and grief when he heard the word of the Lord, but he took action. That's what we read in the first few verses of 2 Kings 23: the king convened an assembly of the people of Judah at the temple in Jerusalem and he read to them from the scroll. Josiah wanted the priests and the prophets and all the people to hear the word of God together. For his part, King Josiah made a promise to live in a way that was pleasing to the Lord. He invited his people to do the same – and scripture tells us that the people joined the king in making that promise.

### III. WORDS FOR THE SEASON

So what do the words we've read this morning have to say to us on this first Sunday in Advent? I'd like

to answer that question with a story. It's a continuation of my childhood story. You see, words about sports weren't the only words that were significant to me. I had the privilege of growing up with two Christian parents. My younger sister and I spent our childhood going to Sunday school and church every week. I learned the words and stories of the Bible. And when I was in third grade – about the same age as Josiah was when he became king, I made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

However, like the Israelites, over time I became infatuated with other gods. I forgot my allegiance to the one true God and offered sacrifice on the altar of teen popularity and sought notoriety from athletic and academic accomplishments or success as it was defined by my peers in high school and early in college. But after my freshman year at Stetson University my world was rocked by a break-up with my girlfriend.

It sounds a little goofy that it impacted so much, but I thank God it did. Because that break-up drove me to the Bible in the summer after my freshman year in college. I believed from my childhood in church that the scriptures are the right place to look when you are asking questions about the meaning and purpose of life. So that's where I looked. I found myself drawn to the gospel of Luke, especially the fifteenth chapter. That's where Jesus tells three consecutive stories about things that were lost being found: a sheep; a coin; and a son.

Now I knew those stories from when I was a child going to Sunday school. I could have repeated them to you nearly word for word. But what happened to me that summer is that those words in the Bible became personal. Those words were about me: I was that lost sheep for whom the good shepherd left the 99 to search; I was the lost coin that the woman celebrated when it was found; I was the prodigal son

who the gracious father came running to embrace and welcome home. The words of the Bible were no longer stories for children. They were about me!

That's what I believe happened to Josiah when he heard God's word. And that's what I believe can happen to you and me when we commit to spending the time to listen for God's word to us – no matter what our age.

So here's a challenge for each one of us during this Advent season. With thanks to our family ministries team and congregational care leaders, we have this wonderful Advent devotional resource available to us. I challenge you, beginning today, to use it as a way to get into God's word every day. I don't know what will happen for you if you accept this challenge and spend time reading the Bible on a daily basis. But I do know that Hebrews 4, beginning in verse 12, says this:

*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render account.*

Who knows? You may just find that God's living word as recorded in this book will change your life. It happened for King Josiah. It happened for me. This Advent season it may be your turn...



# Words

Dr. Bruce Hedgepeth  
November 29, 2015