

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dearly Beloved,

We are picking up speed now as we take our survey through the Old Testament this year.

Last week we were at the beginning of Solomon's reign when he prayed for wisdom to rule.

This week already we are at the beginning of King Jeroboam's reign over the 10 northern tribes.

What has happened in between is that Solomon did not follow God whole-heartedly.

Instead, he worshiped other gods and built temples for them around Jerusalem. ^{1 Kings 11:33}

So after Solomon died, the Lord divided the kingdom, giving Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the southern tribes of Judah and Simeon,

and giving one of Solomon's officers, Jeroboam, the 10 northern tribes of Israel.

From here on out, we will need to make the distinction between these two kingdoms,

the Kingdom of Judah in the south, which had Jerusalem and thus also the temple of the Lord, and the Kingdom of Israel in the north.

The Lord had given Jeroboam a promise, **"if you will listen to all that I command you...**

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."

Our text is how Jeroboam began his reign of the northern kingdom of Israel.

We read as follows in Jesus' name:

And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin... ^(ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen* ^(John 17:17)

Jeroboam was no fool, so I want you to see the intelligence in his plan.

How do you make and keep a people loyal to you? Among other things:

You separate them from others and let them think that you have set them free.

You make the transition as easy, smooth, and familiar as possible.

Now if Jeroboam had simply put up new idols and established a completely different religion and said, "These are your new gods, O Israel,"

it would have been a startling jolt to their religious sensitivities.

He could have expected heavy pushback which would have accomplished the opposite effect.

But here, he takes what they already know and are familiar with and "tweaks" it.

For example: He simply changed the location from Jerusalem to Bethel and Dan.

There were practical reasons for this: Jerusalem was too far south and the ascent was a hard trip.

Bethel was closer to those in the south and Dan to those in the north. And a less arduous trip.

He made his priesthood to be more inclusive. (That's a fun word these days, isn't it?)

Any man from any tribe could be a priest.

There was so much more freedom allowed to the people than the exclusive Aaronic priesthood that the Lord had established so many years ago.
And he moved the harvest festival back a month.
They still celebrated the harvest, just not at the same exact time.

Again, these don't seem to be like huge changes to us in the NT era.
I mean, what is the difference between worshipping in Jerusalem, or in Bethel or Dan?
What difference would it make if a priest was a descendant of Aaron or not?
And how important is a certain date for celebrating a harvest festival to the Lord?
Surely, the Lord is happy that we are celebrating His good gifts at any time.

But what about the two golden calves? Wouldn't that have been a big red flag?
Hadn't the Lord threatened to destroy Israel at Mt. Sinai the last time that was tried?
But I wonder if they were suffering from fuzzy memories from childhood Sabbath school.
Had they grown up learning their Bible history lessons, but then had grown lax in their study, and had long since stopped meditating on them as if they were merely children's stories?
And so, remembering the story about the golden calf and that Aaron himself had set it up, they didn't remember the whole story and what happened as a result of it?
Or maybe they had just grown so accustomed to seeing idols in their land during Solomon's reign that this didn't faze them.

But Jeroboam seems to have remembered what the people said when Aaron made the golden calf,
"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"
By these words, Jeroboam seems to be connecting his innovations in worship with what some might have thought of as the true worship, as if his innovations were merely an extension of what was happening in Jerusalem.

...
How is that for a well-considered and well-executed plan by Jeroboam?
Most of the people took to it immediately and never departed from it throughout the history of the Kingdom of Israel.
You see, Jeroboam realized the unifying power of the faith and practice of the Christian Church, but he didn't want the people to be unified. He wanted them to remain divided and loyal to him. He didn't think of them as the Lord's people, but as his people.
And even though the Lord had freely given the kingdom of Israel to him, without his merit, he thought that it was up to him to keep them under his reign.
And even though the Lord had promised that He would establish Jeroboam's kingdom with Jeroboam's faithfulness to the Lord's commands and promises, Jeroboam did not trust Him.

Jeroboam's plan was smart by worldly standards and it was expertly implemented, but it was not wise or godly and it actually and eventually destroyed his kingdom.
By his "reforms," he became the ravenous wolf in sheep's clothing we heard of in the Gospel. His wicked actions, perhaps seeming pious enough, destroyed families, clans, and tribes, as they led Israel away from the one true God and the coming Messiah.
Though they might have seemed like little infractions, we hear the Lord's reaction to these religious innovations: **...this thing became a sin...**

One might be tempted to think that God was simply giving them all these commands about where to worship, who should sacrifice, when to gather, and what (or what not) to gather around, simply to test their obedience, to see if they would remain faithful to Him.

But that would be a major mistake.

Innovations were strictly prohibited, not for the sake of obedience,
but for the sake of the Gospel,

so that the people could leave the Temple with 100% certainty of the Lord's forgiveness/comfort.

By the Lord's command and promise, by His covenant,

He had told His people where and how and through whom they would receive His holiness.

Jerusalem was where the Lord had put His holy name.

His name hallowed that ground as the place where Christ would make His sacrifice,
not Bethel or Dan.

The Aaronic priests were those that God had set apart to perform the sacrifices acceptable to Him
and to serve as His official ambassadors to declare God's people forgiven, clean, and holy.

The 7th month's harvest festival was intimately connected with the Day of Atonement,

the day the Lord sanctified (made holy) to declare that atonement had been made each year
by the authorized priests through the authorized sacrifices on the authorized mercy seat.

Those golden calves didn't have a mercy seat.

They didn't have the tablets of the covenant of the Lord – the Word of God.

They didn't free anyone from the bondage of the slavery to sin... instead, **this thing became a sin.**

...

There is plenty for us to learn from this Sunday school and Bible History lesson.

First of all, these are not only lessons for children to learn when they are young... and then to forget,
but are written for our learning throughout our life so that we're aware of and flee these temptations
and if caught in them, may cling to our Savior in faith, and seek His forgiveness by that same Word.

Second, that words have meaning, which is infinitely more true when they are God's Words.

Jeroboam ignored God's Words, which prohibited reforms to His worship given by Moses.

And yet, Jeroboam also misused God's Words, changing them ever so slightly, yet completely,
to mean what he desired them to say and not what God had said.

In our culture today, when we have so many people telling us that words don't matter –
that what is true for you may not be true for me--this is a very real danger to our faith.

If we can't trust the words when God says, "you are forgiven," or "this is My body/blood,"
then our faith will always be in doubt, which is right where the devil wants you to be.

You see, the devil doesn't need you to be a complete hedonist for you to join him in hell.

He just needs to get you to disbelieve God's forgiveness and so separate you from His Christ.

Third, that our beliefs and our practices also have meaning.

Just as Israel's services were ordered to teach & administer the grace, forgiveness & holiness of God,
so the Divine Service is ordered to teach and administer this same grace, forgiveness, and holiness
week after week in the absolution, the sermon, and the Lord's Supper.

We are foolish to make innovations for the sake of novelty, or to catch the attention of the world,
or to please our own flesh.

Nor ought we to make innovations based on fear, as Jeroboam did, fear that the Church might die,
for we have a promise from God that the Church will remain until He comes again.

We worship the way we do because it points us Christ, His person and His work, every week,
as we receive His human birth, and sing with the angels: Glory to God in the highest...
and receive His perfect life and teachings in the hearing the Gospel and other Scripture lessons,
and receive His sacrificial death, & resurrection in the Holy Communion,
where we *proclaim our Lord's death until He comes* and
are given His *crucified and risen body and blood* for the forgiveness of our sins.
We constantly need to hear and receive this story of our salvation so that it is engrained in us
and gives us our identity as holy, baptized children of God and heirs of His kingdom.

The Divine Service helps us to identify those who would lead us astray, away from Christ
and instead to trust in others or ourselves, as they teach things strange to our ears,
things not taught in the Divine Service.

For, make no mistake, we are not immune from following present-day Jeroboams.
Bible History and Church History are full of people who started well, but ended in hell.
We, as a group, and we, as individuals, are no less susceptible to following ideas
devised in our own hearts or the false hearts of others.

So it is no small petition, then, when we pray as we did already this morning
“Grant to us, O Lord, we beseech You, the spirit to always think and do those things that are right.”
To always think on God’s Word correctly, not only about it, that it is true,
but even to cherish it and *hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest* it
as if it were the very Word of God and Word of Life, by which forgiveness, life and salvation
are given to you,
And then to live according to that Word, *according to His will* and *always do what is right*.
This is a huge petition that only your wise and loving Savior can and does grant onto you
in Jesus Christ your Lord.

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria