

Sermon Text (2 Kings 18:1–12 ESV)

¹ In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. ² He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. ³ And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. ⁴ He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan). ⁵ He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. ⁶ For he held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. ⁷ And the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him. ⁸ He struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city.

⁹ In the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it, ¹⁰ and at the end of three years he took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. ¹¹ The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria and put them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, ¹² because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded. They neither listened nor obeyed.

God Has Cleansed the Temple of Your Heart

“[T]hey did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” This sentence, or one similar to it, is found forty times in the Old Testament. Seven of those times are in the book of Judges, one of those times is in the book of 1 Samuel, twenty-four of those times are in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, seven of those times are in the book of 2 Chronicles, and it is found in the book of Jeremiah one last time. The Israelites, along with their kings, were a people that were constantly sinning against God. Even having a faithful leader, such as Moses, did not guarantee that they would also be faithful or remain faithful.

During one of those unfaithful moments, they “spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food [that is, the manna from heaven]’” (Numbers 21:5). In response to their unfaithfulness, “the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people,

so that many people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). It was then that the people saw the error of their ways and repented. So, Moses prayed to God on behalf of the people, and God said, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Moses did as God said, and “if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Numbers 21:9). The people ended up keeping this bronze serpent and taking it with them, even though the purpose for it was now completed. And, eventually, the people began to worship the bronze serpent instead of God.

Another false god that the people worshipped was Asherah. Asherah was a goddess that the wooden Asherah poles depicted. Along with these Asherah poles, pillars were set up that were elongated stones that had an appearance similar to that of grave markers with rounded tops. Both the Asherah poles and the pillars were used in the same type of sinful worship.

One last specific type of sin that the people were partaking in was the worship of false gods at high places. The high places were local sacred sites that often stood on hilltops but also could be found on platforms in the towns. Before Solomon built the temple, these high places used to be used for proper worship of the one true God, and sacrifices were offered to him there. However, after Solomon’s temple was finished, the Israelites began to neglect the true worship of God at the temple and did not follow his Word. Therefore, the high places began to be used by the Israelites for false worship.

While these are specific evils that the Israelites committed and that their kings supported, their evil could be summarized in this way: “[The Israelites] did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded. They neither listened nor obeyed” (2 Kings 18:12). We can see this clearly in the state that the temple was in when Hezekiah became king. We hear in the book of 2 Chronicles that the Israelites

had “shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps and [had] not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the Holy Place to the God of Israel” (2 Chronicles 29:7). And the temple itself was full of uncleanness and impurities. The people were not being taught of God and his commands. Therefore, even those who had been instructed in these things did not persevere in the faith. It was for this reason that God allowed “[t]he king of Assyria [to carry] the Israelites [of the northern kingdom of Israel] away to Assyria” (2 Kings 18:11). Unlike the southern kingdom of Judah, who would eventually be carried off into captivity in Babylon and return after seventy years, the northern kingdom would not return. They did not persevere in the faith, and they faced the consequences for it.

Because of all of the evil that the Israelites did, we can become used to hearing the sentence, “[T]hey did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” In fact, we can become so used to it that the sentence that we hear in our reading for today might surprise us. We hear that Hezekiah, the king of Judah, “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Kings 18:3). The sentence “And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD,” or one similar to it, is found only seventeen times in the Old Testament. All of them are found in the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles (nine in Kings and eight in Chronicles).

As for the right that he had done, our reading for today says that Hezekiah “removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it” (2 Kings 18:4). The high places were at one time used for the proper worship of God, but they were no longer used that way, so Hezekiah removed them. The bronze serpent no longer served a purpose, so Hezekiah broke it into pieces since it was now being used for evil.

In addition to those things, in the book of 2 Chronicles, we hear that Hezekiah restored the temple and temple worship. “In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the LORD and repaired them” (2 Chronicles 29:3). He gathered the Levites together and had them cleanse the temple of all the impurities and everything unclean. Once the temple had been restored, it was rededicated, and the proper worship of God began again.

The right that Hezekiah did in the eyes of the LORD was summarized in this way: “He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel” (2 Kings 18:5). “[H]e held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses” (2 Kings 18:6). Even though his father, Ahaz, was a wicked king who had not instructed his son in God’s Word and in right worship, Hezekiah still ended up being a faithful king who believed in God and did as he said. This is possibly due to the prayers and efforts of his mother and grandmother, much like how Timothy was raised by a God-fearing mother and grandmother.

Is there a danger of things becoming as bad for us as they did for the Israelites? Could you walk into church one day and find it full of false gods and other impurities? You probably don’t have to worry about seeing anything like that happen. However, there is a temple that you do have to be on guard for. That temple is your own heart. You may have been well catechized in our school as a child, learning everything that is taught in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, or you may have learned these things as an adult in our Christianity 101 class. You may know all of the same biblical accounts that you hear year after year after year extremely well due to how much you hear them here at church. However, you still easily do what is “evil in the sight of the LORD,” and you do it way more than forty times. In fact, you do it way more than forty times in just one day.

We can find ourselves being tempted to sin in ways similar to how the Israelites were tempted to sin. For example, just like how the Israelites were tempted to worship the bronze

serpent, something that pointed to how the promised Messiah would one day save them from their sins, so we may be tempted to treat something like a crucifix that points us to how Jesus did save us from our sins as an object of worship. We may also be tempted to look at the physical elements of water in Holy Baptism and the bread and wine in Holy Communion and treat them as more special than they actually are apart from the Word of God. We even find ourselves setting up things in our hearts that are clearly false gods in the place of God. Maybe our false god is our favorite sports team or other favorite past time. Maybe it's the extracurricular activities that are sometimes scheduled during church services. Maybe it's work or our friends and family. Whatever it is, suddenly, the temples of our hearts begin to look very unclean and full of impurities.

There are many reasons why we do the evil that we do. Unfortunately, because we are by nature sinful, we will never be able to cease from doing evil completely. However, what is one of the reasons why we could find ourselves falling into certain sins and slowly falling further and further away from God, leaving the temples of our hearts as nothing but an unclean and impure mess? It is when we cease to persevere in the faith and no longer make worshipping God and learning of him and what he wants for us a priority. That is why making sure that we regularly stay in the Word and making sure that our children get a good Christian education is so important. Even though that regular worship and Christian education will not prevent us from sinning, it will help keep our faith alive, so that we do not find ourselves conquered by our enemy, the devil, and carried away by him.

It is also by regularly staying in that Word and getting a Christian education that we hear that message that is so important for us to hear: we may have done what was evil in the sight of the LORD, but Jesus did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. We may have deserved to die for our sins, but Jesus died for our sins in our place, paying the price for all of the evil that we have

done in the sight of the LORD. And now, because Jesus lives, we have the confidence that we will live too. When we look to Jesus hanging on the cross in faith, just as the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent in faith, we are saved.

Therefore, it is thanks to God that all of the uncleanness and impurities of our hearts are removed, for he has removed them himself, washing them away in the waters of Holy Baptism, and continuing to wash them away to this day. This is the best news that any of us can hear. Therefore, let us continue to hear it, trusting in God, since he alone has cleansed us and continues to preserve us.