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The three kings' failure against the Moabites. Walking in the light.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 3. In the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Ahab became king over Israel in Samaria, and he reigned twelve years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, though not like his father and mother, for he put away the pillar of Baal that his father had made. Nevertheless he clung to the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.

He did not depart from it. Now Meshach king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and he had to deliver to the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs and the wool of a hundred thousand rams. But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

So king Jehoram marched out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel. And he went and sent word to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, The king of Moab has rebelled against me. Will you go with me to battle against Moab? And he said, I will go.

I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses. Then he said, By which way shall we march? Jehoram answered, By the way of the wilderness of Edom. So the king of Israel went with the king of Judah and the king of Edom.

And when they had made a circuitous march of seven days, there was no water for the army or for the animals that followed them. Then the king of Israel said, Alas, the Lord has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab. And Jehoshaphat said, Is there no prophet of the Lord here through whom we may inquire of the Lord? Then one of the king of Israel's servants answered, Elisha the son of Shaphat is here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah.

And Jehoshaphat said, The word of the Lord is with him. So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him. And Elisha said to the king of Israel, What have I to do with you? Go to the prophets of your father and to the prophets of your mother.

But the king of Israel said to him, No, it is the Lord who has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab. And Elisha said, As the Lord of hosts lives before whom I stand, were it not that I have regard for Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would neither look at you nor see you. But now bring me a musician.

And when the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him. And he said, Thus says the Lord, I will make this dry streambed full of pools. For thus says the Lord, You will not see wind or rain, but that streambed shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink, you, your livestock and your animals.

This is a light thing in the sight of the Lord. He will also give the Moabites into your hand. And you shall attack every fortified city and every choiced city, and shall fell every good tree and stop up all springs of water and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

The next morning, about the time of offering the sacrifice, behold, water came from the direction of Edom, till the country was filled with water. When all the Moabites heard that the kings had come up to fight against them, all who were able to put on armour from the youngest to the oldest were called out and were drawn up at the border. And when they rose early in the morning, and the sun shone on the water, the Moabites saw the water opposite them as red as blood, and they said, This is blood the kings have surely fought together and struck one another down.

Now then, Moab, to the spoil. But when they came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose and struck the Moabites, till they fled before them. And they went forward, striking the Moabites as they went, and they overthrew the cities.

And on every good piece of land every man threw a stone until it was covered. They stopped every spring of water, and felled all the good trees, till only its stones were left

in Kir Harosheth, and the slingers surrounded and attacked it. When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through opposite the king of Edom, but they could not.

Then he took his oldest son who was to reign in his place, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel, and they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. 2 Kings chapter 3 rejoins the narrative of the kings after the succession narrative of Elijah and Elisha in chapters 1 and 2. Jehoram comes to the throne in the 18th year of Jehoshaphat of Judah.

In chapter 1 verse 17 we're told that he became king in the second year of Jehoram king of Judah. In chapter 8 verse 16 we're told that Jehoram became king of Judah in the fifth year of Joram or Jehoram of Israel. How are we to make sense of these seemingly conflicting details? There is a rather simple explanation.

Toward the end of the reign of Jehoshaphat, Jehoram of Judah reigned alongside his father for seven years. His sole reign only began in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel. Jehoram of Israel is the son of Ahab, the brother of Ahaziah, his predecessor on the throne.

The typical statement that you would find concerning the reign of the king is found here, near the beginning of Jehoram's reign, rather than at its untimely end a few chapters later, where it would interrupt the narrative flow. Jehoram of Israel is a king who does evil, even though his sin is mitigated relative to the evil of Ahab and Jezebel, his father and mother. He makes some minimal gestures towards faithfulness to the Lord by putting away the pillar of Baal that Ahab had set up.

Nevertheless, he continued in the sin of Jeroboam the son of Abad, presumably the idolatrous worship of the golden calves. This was a breaking of the second commandment, whereas the pillar of Baal was a breaking of the first. The first verse of 2 Kings tells us about the rebellion of Moab against Israel.

The narrative thread was left hanging, and we have to wait for chapter 3 for it to be taken up again. Moab was subjugated as a tributary kingdom by David, an event recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 8 verse 2. Since that point, Israel had dominated Moab, first as a united kingdom under David and Solomon, and then as the northern kingdom of Israel. At this point, Moab rises up, causing trouble both for Israel and Judah, Judah being the lesser part in the alliance between the two kingdoms.

This is something we see in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, where the Moabites attack Jehoshaphat with the Ammonites and the Muunites. Jehoram of Israel calls upon Jehoshaphat to join him. Jehoshaphat of Judah was likely in a marriage covenant with Israel at this point, as his son Jehoram, who would later become Jehoram of Judah, had married Athaliah, a granddaughter of Amrai.

It's important that we don't mix up our Jehorams. The Jehoram in the northern kingdom of Israel is the last of the Amraid kings. The Jehoram in the southern kingdom is the successor of Jehoshaphat his father, and for some time co-regent.

That there are Jehorams on the thrones of the northern and the southern kingdom at the same time suggests that these two nations are being twinned in many ways. They're becoming too close through their alliances. The consequences of this too close joining will be seen in the events around the story of Jehu, and then later on in the devastation that Athaliah wreaks in the southern kingdom.

We should also observe the way that the pattern of events that we see in 1 Kings chapter 22 is being repeated in many senses in this chapter. In verses 4 and 5 of that chapter, And he said to Jehoshaphat, Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead? And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses. And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, Inquire first for the word of the Lord.

Much the same sort of thing will happen here. Once again there will be a misleading prophecy, and an unfavourable but inconclusive result of the battle. The battle against the Syrians in chapter 22 of 1 Kings had ended badly for Israel and Judah.

King Ahab had been killed in that conflict. But now the two nations join together once again to fight in a similar manner. Edom is a vassal kingdom of Judah, and it joins them as they go south to the Dead Sea, through the wilderness of Edom.

They hope to surprise the Moabites to their east. It's possible that they take this more circuitous route, because the crossing near Jericho may be controlled by the Moabites. However, taking this route through the wilderness, there is no water.

Jehoram of Israel suggests that the Lord might have called out the three kings, in order to give them as a weakened force into the hand of Moab. As in 1 Kings chapter 22 though, Jehoshaphat desires the counsel of a prophet of the Lord, and he is directed to Elisha by one of Jehoram of Israel's servants. The three kings go to consult with Elisha, who presumably is with the army at this point, perhaps as one enjoying at least a semi-official role.

Elisha's reception of Jehoram of Israel, however, is cold. He says that he should go to one of the prophets of his father and mother. As a very surprising detail here, he summons a musician to help him in his process of prophesying.

Prophecy in scripture often has a poetic or lyrical quality. Perhaps we're supposed to think that he sung part of this. It would certainly be appropriate for the spirit's association with the glory of speech, and the transformation of speech into song.

1 Samuel chapter 10 verses 5-6 is another part of scripture where we see some sort of

relationship between prophecy and music. Likewise in the case of David, and perhaps also in the singers who are associated with the temple. Perhaps the connection between prophecy and music, as John Ahern observes, is found in the way that music can open us up to things beyond ourselves.

In Ephesians chapter 5 verse 18, Paul speaks about not getting drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but being filled with the spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart. While condemning intoxication and drunkenness, the scripture speaks about the way in which we can open ourselves up to God through song. Music is something that can catch us up and carry us along.

It can place us into different emotional states, and it can also be the sort of spirit that binds together people in a crowd. Music then would seem to have a fitting correspondence with prophecy. Elisha's desire for a musician might be for someone to help him to open up, to adopt the right spiritual posture to receive the word of God.

The spirit is, as it were, the music of God, which is one reason why it is so important that we give thought to fitting music that should accompany our worship of God, to open us up to Him and to His presence. The word of the Lord comes through Elisha, and he promises that he will make the dry stream bed full of pools. This will occur apart from wind and rain, and it will provide all that the company need to drink, both them and their animals.

The provision of such water in the wilderness might remind us of Exodus narratives. And beyond that, he is going to give the Moabites into their hand. The prophecy ends with the statement that they will attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop up all springs of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

That last part of the prophecy is particularly surprising, as elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 19 to 20, we are told that they should not do these things. When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.

Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it falls. The cutting down of trees was only for a limited purpose, for the purpose of getting wood for siege works. Beyond that, they were supposed to leave the land alone.

They were expressly forbidden to spoil the land. And yet, here in the prophecy of Elisha, this is exactly what we are told that they will do. It might make us scratch our heads and

wonder what's going on.

As we've seen the Lord use prophecy to deceive and mislead people to their doom, people who are wicked and reject his word, perhaps we are seeing that happen again here. Back in 1 Kings chapter 13, the man of God from Judah was misled by the old prophet from Bethel, by heeding his lying prophecy and not adhering to the word that the Lord had given to him directly. He ended up being killed by a lion.

In 1 Kings chapter 22, the Lord had put a lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets, and Micaiah had to alert him to it. The Lord is shrewd with the wicked, and people who reject his word will find themselves coming to ruin. The next morning, the Lord's promise of water comes to pass.

The whole country is filled with water that comes from the direction of Edom, and the Moabites hear, too late, that all the kings have come to fight against them, and they scramble to get their army together. They look out early in the morning, and the sun shines on the water, and they see the water as red with blood. The fact that they see the water as red with blood as the sun rises up would suggest that the three kings of their enemies are camped there east.

Edom, Israel, and Judah have come all the way around and are attacking them from the direction that they least expected. However, to the Moabites, the water that looks like blood is proof that their enemies have been defeated. They must go up and gather the spoil.

Water turning to blood might also make us think of the story of the Exodus. When they come to the camp of the Israelites, the Lord's promise that he would give the Moabites into their hand comes to pass. The Moabites are caught unawares, and the Israelites and Judahites and Edomites pursue them, destroying everything in their path.

They lay the land and its cities waste until the king of Moab holds up in Kir Harashath. Desperate, not knowing what to do, he sacrifices his son for a burnt offering on the wall, presumably as a sacrifice to his god Chemosh. All human stratagems had failed for Meshut, the king of the Moabites, and now he turns to his god.

And most surprising of all, at this point, great wrath comes upon Israel. Where does this great wrath come from? Is it the Moabites being spurred up against them by this action? Probably not. Nor is it likely to be the wrath of Chemosh, who is called the filth of the Moabites elsewhere in 1 Kings.

The wrath in question is almost certainly from the Lord, which leaves us with the question of how the wrath of the Lord relates to this sacrifice. Why, for instance, would the Lord strike out at Israel rather than against Moab? It seems most likely to me that what is happening is that they are brought to the point where it seems absolutely certain

that they will win, and then at that point the Lord springs his trap. The king of Moab has desperately tried his last plans.

He has tried to break through with the 700 men, and then he has sacrificed his son. And now, on the very brink of victory, the entire tide of the battle turns. As in chapter 22 of 1 Kings, they return to their own land, and the battle is inconclusive.

Israel, Judah, and Edom have been disobeying the word of the Lord, disobeying the word of the Lord concerning the manner of battle, perhaps also disobeying the word of the Lord in trying to control Moab at all. In Deuteronomy 2, verse 9 we read, And the Lord said to me, Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given awe to the people of Moab for a possession. Peter Lighthouse suggests that we might see a sort of perverted exodus narrative in the As his name means salvation, he might also remind us of Joshua.

His sacrifice of his first-born son maybe reminds us of the story of the Passover. The exodus themes that we saw to this point, which may have seemed to the reader to have foretold a defeat of the Moabites by Israel, may actually foreshadow a very different result. A question to consider, what insights into God's character and the ways that he deals with people might we draw from this chapter? 1 John 1, verse 1 to 2, verse 6 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things, so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him, and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you, so that you may not sin.

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

Whoever says, I know him, but does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him.

Whoever says he abides in him, ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. The book of 1 John lacks certain of the features that we might usually associate with an epistle. Some scholars have suggested that it might have been an encyclical.

However, it does seem to be directed to a specific situation and to its issues. It was most likely written by John, the brother of James, and the author of the gospel and of Revelation. This has been disputed by many, but when we look at the resemblances between the works, the traditional identification of the author would seem to be supported.

When reading such a work, as we do not have intact writings of the people to whom John is responding, we have to engage in a sort of shadow reading. We must try to deduce the arguments of John's opponents, inferring their position from John's arguments against them. Many scholars have argued that what we have here is an argument against a sort of proto-gnosticism.

The opponents of John are arguing that Christ did not come in the flesh, and denying that Jesus was the son of God. They also seem to be arising from within the church itself. It is very difficult to define gnosticism, which was a very broad and variegated movement.

Most represent it as a sort of dualism, dividing spirit, which is good and divine, and matter, which is created and evil. This obviously creates problems for the claim that Jesus came in the flesh. A man named Corinthus in the second half of the first century is often seen as a key exponent, representative of the sort of position that John might have been responding to.

I. Howard Marshall quotes Irenaeus, the early church father, on Corinthus. A certain Corinthus in Asia taught that the world was not made by the first God, but by a power which was widely separated and remote from that supreme power which is above the all, and did not know the God who is over all things. Jesus, he suggested, was not born of a virgin, for that seemed to him impossible, but was the son of Joseph and Mary, just like all the rest of men, but far beyond them in justice and prudence and wisdom.

After his baptism Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove, from the power that is over all things, and then he proclaimed the unknown father and accomplished miracles. But at the end Christ separated again from Jesus, and Jesus suffered and was raised again, but Christ remained impassable, since he was pneumatic. In his commentary on the book, Peter Lighthouse pays a special attention to chapter 2 verse 22 and its description of Antichrist.

Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, he who denies the father and the son. For Lighthouse, the suggestion that the opponents were denying that Jesus is the Christ, or the Messiah, is a key piece of information. It suggests that they were operating within a primarily Jewish framework, and we see in the early church a mix between Gnostic and Jewish positions at a number of points.

1 John chapter 1 does not begin as a typical epistle mite, with the sender and with greetings. It seems more like a written sermon or address. However, it does seem to be directed at an audience that is known to the writer.

It begins with the incarnation. Christ, the word of life, was from the beginning, and they experienced him first hand with their senses. They heard him, they saw him, they looked upon him, they touched him with their hands.

The word of life is both the message and the person. By opening the epistle with a reference to the one who was from the beginning, John might recall the beginning of his gospel. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

As eyewitnesses of this life, they testify concerning it. The life was with the Father, and made manifest to the eyewitnesses of Christ. Christ is the ultimate source of life.

In John chapter 5 verse 26, For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. In chapter 14 verse 6 of the gospel of John, Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The eyewitnesses, in their turn, pass on what they heard and saw and touched, proclaiming it to others in their words. Christ is not just an individual, but the bearer of a life that is shared with his people in fellowship with the gift of the Spirit. John speaks of the communion that they enjoy with the Father and with the Son.

They proclaim what they have seen and what they have heard, so that others would share fellowship with them, that they too would know participation in the life of Christ, and in that fulfill and share in the joy of the apostles themselves. In verse 5, he moves from life and fellowship to light. The message received from Christ is that God is light and without darkness.

The light-darkness contrast recalls creation. The creation of light is the first act of the original creation. Creation moves from darkness to light.

This is a common theme in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 6, For

God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Ephesians chapter 5 verses 8 to 14, For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

In Christ the light of the long-awaited day of the Lord has dawned. God dwells in inapproachable light, without any darkness at all, and as the light of Christ dawns, we are called to step into the light, to become people of the light and the day that has come upon us. Fellowship with the God who is light requires that we walk in that light.

This is not merely the site of fellowship with God, but of fellowship with each other as well. Darkness separates us from God, and it separates us from each other. In the darkness of sin, we shrink back from the exposure of the light, we hide ourselves from others, and we hide ourselves also from God.

As we walk into the light, we can give ourselves both to God and to our neighbours. Mere verbal affirmation of Christ is not enough. To know fellowship with the one who is light and life, we must walk in the light.

Our walking in the light is proof of fellowship. The light is scary because it exposes things, most particularly our sins. However, the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from all sin.

Denying that we have sin is not only self-deception, but presenting God himself to be a liar. The blood of Christ is for those who walk in the light. Those who refuse to expose their sins to the light cannot truly be forgiven them.

You can only know forgiveness for what you have confessed. Receiving the forgiveness that God offers requires that we acknowledge our sin. And that first step into the light, confessing our sins, exposing them to the truth of God, is the most scary step of all.

Walking in the light necessitates a transformed manner of relating to sin. The darkness is a realm of hiding from the light that exposes sin. It is also sin's home turf and its breeding ground.

As guilt makes us shrink back from the light, we find that sin will grow, it will spread, and it will develop. Shrinking back from the light that exposes sins for forgiveness condemns

us to walk in the realm where sin holds sway. John wishes his readers to avoid sin, that way of life that belongs to the darkness.

However, as fallen people we will sin. Fallen human beings cannot live sinless lives. When that happens, John wants us to be assured that we have both an advocate and a sacrifice for our sins.

It is confidence in this that enables us to step out into the exposure of the light. Jesus speaks on our behalf before the Father. He's an advocate for us.

He also deals with our sins as an atoning sacrifice. These are very prominent themes in the book of Hebrews, for instance. Jesus' death covers our sins, like the covering of the ark from which the word is taken.

Perhaps we could think of this as a sort of heat shield that enables us to approach the consuming, fiery holiness of God without being burnt up. In this capacity, Jesus covers the whole creation. He saves all of humanity from destruction.

The world is still here because Jesus died, and his death covers the earth, preserving it from God's judgment. However, while Christ's sacrifice saves all in this sense, and he is the Savior and the Lord of all, he is the Savior of those who believe in a special sense. The judgment of the wicked has been delayed by the death of Christ, but they will be destroyed.

However, the righteous will finally be redeemed. John moves on to the question of how we know that we know Christ. The answer is by keeping his commandments.

Reading this, we might be tempted to think that we know that we know Christ by knowing that we keep his commandments. We look at the works that we have done and we measure them up relative to God's law, and if they seem to be pretty good relative to God's law, we know that we're in the right with God. But experience would teach that that doesn't give much comfort much to the time.

When we do compare our works to God's law, we find that they fall so far short. Perhaps the knowledge is not an abstract knowledge, nor is the assurance found in knowing something about our works, but in the practice of our works. How do you know that you have come into a loving relationship with your spouse, for instance? Do you stand back and look at all the works that you have done and measure them up next to the standard of the perfect husband or wife? No, the best way to know that you're in a loving relationship with your spouse is by actually living in fellowship with them.

As you live in a way that honors and seeks to please your spouse, you will almost certainly find that that is where the love of your spouse is most clearly known and where the strongest assurance of the truth of your relationship is to be discovered. It is the same with our relationship with God. If you want to be assured of your relationship with

God, seek his face, ask his forgiveness, obey his commandments, live in his presence, seek his good pleasure.

As you abide in the love of God in such a way, you will be able to enjoy a much greater assurance of the fact that you have come to know him. On the other hand, how do you know that someone has not come to a knowledge of God? Look at the fruits that they produce. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. The person who has truly come to know Christ will live in a manner that manifests that truth. He will keep the word of Christ and in him the love of God will be perfected.

If then we say that we abide in Christ, we must live our lives in fellowship with him and in a way that follows the pattern of his own life. Considering 1 John and other passages in the New Testament, how can we further fill out the picture of what it means to live in the light?