

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Steph Spencer
Hidden Heroes
2 Kings 22**

Good morning, everyone. My name is Steph Spencer and I am on staff with The Table that meets on Sunday nights. I'm excited to be here with you this morning. As that video kind of hinted, I'm going to start this morning with a question. That might be hard for the introverts in the room because I would like you to talk to each other, and I hope you have had enough coffee at this point so that feels like a comfortable thing to do. What I'd like you to do is talk to the person you came with or somebody in your aisle, or if you feel like you need to stretch your feet, go ahead and walk someplace else in the room, but I'd like you talk about what your favorite story is. It could be a book or a movie, but your favorite story and who the hero of that story is. So go ahead, find someone and talk to each other about your favorite story. [Pause.]

All right, now here is the part that might require a little bit of courage. I hope there are a few people in the room who are able to do this with me. I know this is a big room, but I would love to hear what some of you said your favorite story is and who the hero of that is, and for you to shout it out in this big room. Anyone willing to kick us off? Good, *You Are Special* and who is the hero of *You Are Special*? Eli, the woodcarver is the hero of *You Are Special*. Loved those books. I've read them to my kids. If you haven't read them to your kids, it's a great series of books. Another favorite story? Go ahead and shout it out. You don't have to raise your hand. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and who is the hero in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Atticus Finch is the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One more story? *Heaven Is for Real* and who is the hero of *Heaven Is for Real*? Jesus. Is that what I heard? All right. That's a good one. No one can top that one so we should stop there, right?

What I picked as my favorite story or one of my favorites, at least, is *The Lord of the Rings* and I'm going to start with a confession on this one. I have never read those stories. I have only seen the movies. Feel free to boo me on that. I deserve it. But I love story of *The Lord of the Rings*. I love all the complexities of the characters and their relationships with one another, all while this epic adventure is taking place. At the center, as you probably know, is Frodo, an unlikely hero, who carries the one ring to Mordor.

Today's Bible story from 2nd Kings in the Hidden Gems series involves another unlikely hero. His name is Josiah. We are going to pick up his story in 2nd Kings, chapter 22. If you would like to follow along, there are Bibles in your pews; otherwise, it will also be up on the screen. I'll start by reading verses 1 and 2.

1 Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath. **2**

He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

[Slide shown.] You can see on the king's timeline coming up on the screens that Josiah was one of the last kings of Judah. He ruled from 640 to 609 BC and during his reign, the power in the region shifted from the Assyrians, who had taken over Israel, to the Babylonians, who would be the ones to take over Jerusalem just 12 years after Josiah's rule. This is right at the end of the kingdom of Judah.

The main reason that Josiah was an unlikely hero isn't because he was a child when he began his reign. Josiah was an unlikely hero because he turned out to be a good king in spite of the environment he grew up in. Notice in these verses that Josiah is compared not to his father, but to his ancestor, King David. That's because Josiah's father hardly even sat on the throne. He was killed in an uprising only two years after beginning his rule. Before that Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, ruled for 55 years, but he was a terrible, terrible king. He instituted idol worship and barbaric practices, including child sacrifice, all over the land of Judah, even in the temple of God. Somehow in the midst of that, Josiah grew up to know and follow Yahweh.

When Josiah became king, he instituted great reforms in the land. At the age of 20, he began a campaign to rid the land of idol worship and tore down all the idols around the country. When he was 26, he initiated a project to repair the temple of the Lord. While the repairs were being done, Hilkiah, the high priest, discovered the Book of the Law which had been lost for all those years under the reign of the terrible King Manasseh. Let's pick up the story in 2nd Kings 22:11 after Hilkiah has sent his servant to read the newly discovered Book of the Law to Josiah and Josiah hears the words for the first time.

11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. **12** He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: **13** "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found.

Josiah's response in this moment was "Go and inquire of the Lord" which is significant because as king, he could have taken any action he wanted. What he chose shows he understood his role as king. As king, his role was to govern the people; it was not his job to speak on behalf of the Lord. When Josiah heard the words of the Book of the Law, he knew that what Israel needed in this moment was the voice of a prophet who could tell them what to do. The question was, which prophet to go to? The reign of Josiah was during a period of several Biblical prophets who had names you might recognize like Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. Let's go back to 2nd Kings 22, this time to verse 14, to see whom they sought at this point in Judah's history.

14 Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Akbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

As I talked to people about the message I was going to give today, most, even those who hadn't read or heard much of the Bible, had heard of Josiah. But I didn't run into a single person who had ever heard of Huldah. Some were even confused by her name, like my husband who said,

“You mean like a *Huldah hoop*?” Now that we have kids getting into the elementary age, my husband is sliding comfortably into dad joke territory.

Yet Huldah is the prophet they chose at this key moment and she proves herself faithful to God by delivering a courageous and true message. She confirms the message the prophet Jeremiah had been speaking about the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. But she also revealed that the destruction would not happen during Josiah’s lifetime because of how he responded when the Book of the Law was found.

After hearing Huldah’s message, Josiah went on to institute one of the greatest reforms in Judah’s history. We could easily sit together with that revival as our main message and read 2nd Kings 23 about how he gathered the people, read them the Law, and renewed their covenant with Yahweh, but that’s not what we’re going to do. In this series on Hidden Gems, I think we should focus not on Josiah but on Huldah. I think the fact that most of us have never heard her name might reveal to us a bias we hold when we approach Scriptures. In our culture, we tend to hold independence as one of our highest values. We love watching Bear Grylls survive all by himself out in the wilderness eating things that no human being should eat. We love putting talent center stage on American Idol. We love heroes like Superman, sweeping in to save the day. We love The Lone Ranger and Superman. When I was growing up, Wonder Woman was my favorite, by the way.

When we read the Bible, we tend to look for that independent hero narrative. We find Noah and Moses and Samson and David and Peter and Paul, all those heroes. This isn’t all bad, actually. It’s great to look at heroes and ask, what are things about them that I can emulate? We love the feeling of being inspired by someone who does something we feel we couldn’t do. It can show us the best humanity has to offer, though one problem is that many of the Biblical characters we hold up as independent heroes, like Samson, don’t have much to offer worth emulating.

In the case of Josiah, though, he is actually a pretty solid guy to look up to. He grew up against all odds to follow God. He had the courage to do the right thing. He fought the status quo and had the leadership to guide his people back to the Lord. The problem isn’t that we shouldn’t look up to Josiah as a hero. The problem is that when we do that in this and other texts, we tend to let that independent hero angle have too much sway and we can miss the deeper story that is going on. We need balance.

To understand how this is true, think back to the stories you talked about with each other in the beginning. How many of them could be summed up with an independent hero narrative? But what would be missed if we only saw the story through the eyes of that one hero? In my example, I’m guessing some *Lord of the Rings* fans in the room may have had to bite their tongues when I mentioned only Frodo, because we know that the story is about much more than Frodo. It is a story of the ring and the people of Middle-Earth and a group of unlikely friends who each have a valuable role to play if they want to save it. Though Frodo does many wonderful things we could look up to, the story is not centered on him and him alone.

Let’s look at what we miss in today’s story if we only see Josiah. Most importantly, if we see this as a story only about Josiah, we could miss the story of God and His people. In verse 11, when Josiah tore his clothes, it was because he was mourning on behalf of the people of God who had been led astray by his grandfather. They had built up centers of idol worship around the country, thinking they were at the whim of gods who play with their fates.

The Book of the Law would have told Josiah about God's character and His love for His people. It would have talked about the kinds of laws God asked them to obey as part of His covenant with them. They weren't barbaric laws of child sacrifice, but laws like treating each other with love, remembering what God had done for them and honoring God with their worship and work. The sadness of Josiah in this moment was about a lost community that needed to be redeemed, and his hope that it wasn't too late.

If we see this as a story only about Josiah, we might also miss the interdependence between him and the other people involved. Josiah led the people, but he was not the only leader. Just look at all the people listed in verse 14 alone. Without Hilkiah, the high priest, the Book of the Law would not have been found. Without Huldah, the female prophet we've never heard of, the Word of the Lord would not have been heard at this moment in their history. No one person was more important than another. Hilkiah, Huldah, and Josiah were each fulfilling their roles and each using their gifts to connect the people with God's love. 2nd Kings 22 is not just about Josiah. It is about how God's people were lost, and how He rose up a group of leaders who worked together to bring them back to Him.

I'd like us to think about heroes in other places in the Bible where we might let our independent hero narrative become so strong that we miss the deeper story. One of these that comes to mind for me is Moses. Personally, I love the story of Moses. We often hold Moses as an independent hero and it's true that he did many things we can admire, yet we have to be careful not to let our independent hero view become so strong that we miss the deeper story. At the beginning of his story, we see that it is not just about him. Like when God calls to Moses from the burning bush, He makes it clear that it's not because Moses is so awesome that He wanted to help him reach his life's potential. God had heard the groaning of his people and in His love wanted to rescue them from Egypt.

Like Josiah, Moses' story is intertwined and dependent on others: the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who had the courage to stand up to Pharaoh and save the baby boys he had ordered killed, his mother who hid Moses from the Egyptian soldiers, his sister who followed him in the basket as it floated down the river, the daughter of Pharaoh who pulled Moses out of the river, raised him and gave him his name. Later in life, Aaron and Miriam led alongside Moses, playing roles of priest and prophet. There are all these people he is dependent upon in order to play his role in God's history.

In the New Testament, I think that we do this with Paul. We tend to hold Paul as the independent hero and, again, it's true that he is a great man and did many great things we can admire. Yet Paul himself seemed to know that the story was not about him. He filled his Letters to churches with words about the grace and love of Jesus Christ for all people. He includes sections we tend to skip because we aren't quite sure how they apply, like Romans 16, when he takes the whole chapter to talk about the people who were building the church of Jesus along with him. He talked about Phoebe, one of his benefactors who was also an overseer of the church, and Priscilla, a woman who taught and led a house church alongside her husband Aquila, and Junia, who was outstanding among the apostles. I intentionally chose a few of the women Paul mentioned because I think they are whom we tend to miss most often when we view these stories through the lens of independent heroes. We tend to miss many women throughout history who played essential roles in bringing the Kingdom of God and His love to this earth, women like Moses' mother and sister, women like Hulda.

Often the problem doesn't end with Scripture and how we view the Bible. Where the rubber meets the road on this independent hero view is how it then affects our view of ourselves and the people around us. We can end up feeling lost, like if we or others are not in the spotlight, doing great things, something is wrong, like what we do doesn't actually matter to God or to the world.

But let's think about how Jesus talked about the Gospel, the good news of His coming. He talked about His grace and love and sacrifice ushering in the Kingdom of God. A kingdom cannot be about one person. It is a community centered around a king, in this case, Jesus. The Kingdom of God is about *all* of us, each playing an important role, ushering in a new way of being, spreading the hope and joy and peace of Jesus to this world.

When I was 10, I went on a family road trip to Yellowstone Park. Who has been to Yellowstone? A good number of people have. It is a beautiful park. Beautiful waterfalls. Old Faithful. I was in awe of the beauty of it all. Wouldn't it be tragic if the rivers dried up or the animals disappeared? Ecologists have done much work to preserve the landscape for years to come and they discovered something surprising. It turns out the key might not be to focus on the importance of Old Faithful. The key might be to see the interdependence of the ecosystem. Let's take a look at this video.

[Video begins. *To view, see link below*]

One of the most exciting scientific findings of the past half-century has been the discovery of widespread trophic cascades. A trophic cascade is an ecological process which starts at the top of the food chain and tumbles all the way down to the bottom. And the classic example is what happened in the Yellowstone National Park in the United States when wolves were reintroduced in 1995.

Now we all know that wolves kill various species of animals, but perhaps we're slightly less aware that they give life to many others. Before the wolves turned up (they had been absent for 70 years) the numbers of deer, because there had been nothing to hunt them, had built up and built up in Yellowstone Park, and despite efforts by humans to control them, they had managed to reduce much the vegetation there to almost nothing. They had just grazed it away. But as soon as the wolves arrived, even though they were few in number, they started to have the most remarkable effects.

First, of course, they killed some of the deer but that wasn't the major thing. Much more significantly, they radically changed the behavior of the deer. The deer started avoiding certain parts of the park, the places where they could be trapped most easily, particularly the valleys and the gorges, and immediately those places started to regenerate. In some areas, the height of the trees quintupled in just six years. Bare valley sides quickly became forests of aspen and willow and cottonwood. And as soon as that happened, the birds started moving in. The number of songbirds and migratory birds started to increase greatly. The number of beavers started to increase because beavers like to eat the trees. And beavers, like wolves, are ecosystem engineers. They create niches for other species. And the dams they built in the rivers provided habitats for otters and muskrats and ducks and fish and reptiles and amphibians. The wolves killed coyotes and as a result of that, the number of rabbits and mice began to rise which meant more hawks,

more weasels, more foxes, more badgers. Ravens and bald eagles came down to feed on the carrion that the wolves had left. Bears fed on it, too, and their population began to rise as well, partly also because there were more berries growing on the regenerating shrubs. And the bears reinforced the impact of the wolves by killing some of the calves of the deer. But here's where it gets really interesting.

The wolves changed the behavior of the rivers. They began to meander less. There was less erosion. The channels narrowed. More pools formed. More riffle sections. All of which were great for wildlife habitats. The rivers changed in response to the wolves. And the reason was that the regenerating forests stabilized the banks so that they collapsed less often so the rivers became more fixed in their course.

Similarly, by driving the deer out of some places and the vegetation recovering on the valley sides, there was less soil erosion because the vegetation stabilized that as well. So the wolves, small in number, transformed not just the ecosystem of the Yellowstone National Park, this huge area of land, but also its physical geography.

[Video ends.]

I love that video. Isn't that amazing? I love thinking about the fact that the presence of a few wolves changed the path of a river. The effect of these wolves reminded me of Huldah and Shiphrah and Puah and Phoebe, people of the Bible we may not notice, but who each had a role to play for God to move rivers with His love. Who are the wolves in your life? Who are the Huldahs? Is it you?

I think this is a great picture of what the New Testament talks about with the Body of Christ. There is no one part of us that is more important than the other. Have you been so busy looking at the heroes around you that you've forgotten the important role you are playing? Do you need to be reminded that God values and loves you? That whatever gifts you have, God chose them for you? That how you use them and how you love those around you plays an essential role in ushering in the Kingdom of Christ?

Or are the wolves the people serving the world quietly around us, whom we might not notice if we don't look? People who are loving their neighbors well or reaching across lines to build bridges or areas of tension? People who are being generous and living lives of grace but maybe not on stage or as part of an official program? People who through everyday acts of love and grace are part of bringing the Kingdom of Christ to this world?

Just this past week I struggled with seeing the wolves around me. I was emailing with Dee McIntosh, the new pastor on the Missions team, regarding some articles about Ferguson, Missouri I was thinking of passing along. She noticed that every single article was written by an expert, a hero in the field of justice, names people know because they had gone and done big things. She wondered if those were the only articles I shared, whether I might unintentionally give the impression that only those voices were valid when addressing harder topics. She said, "Sometimes the most powerful narratives come not from those whose life work (and thereby their career) is centered on injustice but those who have been so deeply touched that they stand up in protest."

I think all of us have people we need to remember in our lives who have played a role like this, and we are also playing this role in other people's lives, loving and giving grace and making a bigger difference than we would ever think. There are no independent heroes in the story of God. It is not a story about me or you or that one great champion. It is the story of *us*, the children of God, beloved and valuable, offered forgiveness and hope by Christ, each called to play a role in bringing His Kingdom of love to life in this world. Let's pray.

God, I thank You for the story of Josiah. I thank You for the wonderful heroic things he did, but I also thank You that the story is not just about him. It's about You and Your love for the people of Judah and You and Your love for the people of this whole world. It is about how You used Huldah and Hilkiah and so many others in bringing Your people to You during that time. I pray that You would help us remember that same thing today, that we would see those around us who are woven into the story of our church and this world, who are doing things we might miss that are absolutely essential for bringing Your healing and Your love to this earth. Thank You for the way You help each of us play a part and thank You for the way You value and love us all. In Christ's Name, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.

Link to video: http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q&feature=youtu.be