

More than a Good Story: Of Kings, Prophets, and the Wise
CORE: Spring, 2018
Wednesdays, 10-11:15 a.m. & 4-5:15 p.m.
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Course Description

The Sunday school lessons of our youth made Joshua a godly general and gave us the courageous David, an innocent youth who felled a giant with faith and a few stones. Our adult discoveries that Joshua sought to kill everyone in the "promised land" and that David was avaricious can reasonably kindle a sense of betrayal about what we were told of these stories. And even if the prophets' demands for justice seem boldly relevant, those men seem given to bouts of madness and vitriol. Equally disappointing is Proverbs, whose proffered wisdom comes off as kitschy. And although Job raises a good question about why bad things happen to good people, the book does not put that question to rest. Why should we bother? How could the Spirit be interested in speaking to us through these flawed books?

(This class continues the study begun under the title, "Does the Spirit Still Speak through the Hebrew Scriptures," but does not assume that attendees participated in that class.)

A Week-by-week Synopsis

1. How Low Can People Go? – Joshua & Judges (4/4)

The first book's title is also the name of its chief figure, whose character seems to bear little resemblance to the one who bore the same name in its Aramaic form, Jesus. The book of Judges leaves us looking in vain for a "judge" in the book, let alone anything like justice. Given its early (and recurring) summary statement that "the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (3:7) and the despairing report at book's end that "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25), it's not clear that things have improved by the book's end. So why bother?

2. Is this Any Way to Start a Country? – 1 & 2 Samuel (4/11)

Israel sets out to overcome the problem of "all the people doing what was right in their own eyes," but God does not receive well its proposal to choose a king, and the ne'er-do-well Saul is no Washington. His jealousy spurs feckless pursuit of David around the countryside that leads only to his own fall. Although David's rise to the throne in 2 Samuel sounds a hopeful note, by that book's end, David has proved as compromised as any other ruler. This story sounds way too familiar to offer us help, right?

3. How to Run a Country into the Ground – 1 & 2 Kings, Amos & Hosea (4/18)

From bad to worse. If David had his Bathsheba, Solomon has his harem of foreign wives who "lead his heart astray" from God. And once he's gone, his son, Rehoboam, makes a boneheaded move that leaves Israel's people divided into two nations. And don't even get me started on Jeroboam, the first king of the 10 tribes who went their own way. Parallel to this, Amos & Hosea sound clarion warnings of disaster to come. But what does that have to do with us?

4. The Era of Tragedy – Isaiah 1-39, Jeremiah, Ezekiel (4/25)

The northern 10 tribes may have succumbed to their eastern nemesis, Assyria, but that did not mean that Judah got off scot-free. The three large prophetic books offer varied diagnoses of Judah's health, but none turns in a positive assessment. As Amos and Hosea proved right in their predictions of the northern kingdom's downfall, these three prophets seem to have been on to something. How do they evaluate their compatriots' faults, and why should we care?

5. Recovering from Tragedy – Isaiah 40-66, Haggai, Zechariah (5/2)

The end is the beginning, at least according to these three prophets. The exuberance of the voice in Isaiah 40-66 fed the imagination of Handel's Messiah. The imagery of Haggai & Zechariah, however, is dense – as in Zechariah's vision of an elaborate lampstand with multiple lamps, whose oil is supplied by a feeder bowl. Such images make us wonder what these prophets have been imbibing and again raise questions of relevance to us.

6. Is there a Wise Person in the House? – Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (5/9)

These three books give voice to the pursuit of "wisdom" as a way of thinking about life. While the Torah and the prophets claim to convey God's words – and thus, posit a direct line of authority for their messages – these books tout the benefits of observation of what works, in the pursuit of a successful life. But they also raise contrarian questions about injustice and futility in life that call simplistic observations into question. Given the countervailing standpoints, how can we hope to find any advantage from reading these books?

7. The Truth of a Good Story: Jonah, Ruth, and Esther (5/16)

The dictum that the Bible does not purport to tell the facts of history, pure and simple, reaches a peak in these books. Although their narratives are set in particular times and places that give them the sense of historical novels, features in each suggest that they have more in common with *A Tale of Two Cities* than Vidal's *Lincoln*. But why read these dusty novels when there are so many good contemporary novelists? Does the Spirit speak any truth through these books or has the Spirit moved on to better writers?