

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 1, 2017)

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Sermon manuscript

HAPPY 2017 TO YOU!!

The Law of Holes (when you're in one, stop digging)

(2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33)

Introduction: The beginning of a mess...

In the summer of 2006, I took a camping trip to the Sawtooth Wilderness in central Idaho with my sons and Kathy's brother, Bob.

Planning for this trip - as for many trips worth taking - took months. And, over the months of planning, we had all read rave reviews of the Sawtooth's beauty, devoured Internet trip reports, pored over maps, talked with wilderness Rangers, and salivated over photos we found online.

Visions of Rocky Mountain grandeur were dancing in our heads as we drove to the trailhead. So, imagine our disappointment when, after a three-hour drive from Boise, we began hiking in temperatures in the mid-90's. Exactly what we had left back in San Antonio.

Our first several hours of hiking were on flat terrain. The conditions were exceptionally dry. It was so dry that we kicked up dust-storms as we walked. Our trail took us through a burned-out forest that had been destroyed by fire a couple of years earlier.

I was completely bummed on that first day and wondered if I had made the biggest planning blunder of my life in pointing our group to the Sawtooths.

Given what we experienced over the first ten-mile hike, I feared that the rest of the trip would be just like the beginning - flat, dry, hot.

After all, pitiful starts are often followed by more pitiful.

So, Happy New Year, to you! And how was your 2016? Are you eager for what 2017 holds?

I'll bet there were moments - or even long seasons during the last twelve months - that had you living faithfully for your God, walking with your God. I'll bet last year had its mountaintop grandeur, sunny beaches, oasis moments.

Were there also seasons of spiritual drought? With respect to your life with Jesus, did some of it look like the start of my Idaho camping trip - flat, hot, dry, and dusty?

On this, the first day of a brand-new year, people often take time to look through the windshield at what's in front AND take a look through the rear-view mirror at what is behind.

The rear-view mirror look would have us asking, *"What could I have done differently that would have made looking back at 2016 right now looking back at a year of rich faithfulness?"*

I've asked myself that question. I think of items related to scheduling, related to personal interactions, and some involving my walk with the Lord. If I had access to a good time travel app, I'd go back and do some stuff over again. Maybe you could think of a thing or two you regret about 2016.

But the windshield question may be more productive than the rear-view mirror question. So, here's a question tailor-made for January 1, 2017.

"What might I change about the way I approach this coming year that would result in my looking back three hundred and sixty-four days from now and saying, 'THAT was a great year! I walked with God and did what He called me to do.'"

Now, if your 2016 was great, if it was an unalloyed success, great!

But if there were seasons of faithlessness, 2017 doesn't need to follow suit. Your past may have been as spiritually unsatisfying as the first day of my Idaho trip. It may have been pitiful - but your future doesn't need to be pitiful.

God offers hope to all of us for something better. And we're going to find that hope on display in a little-known, but very provocative story from the Old Testament.

This morning I offer up for your New Year's Day encouragement, the life and times of King Manasseh.

Leading up to Manasseh's Mess

The Threat to Israel/Judah: ASSYRIA!

Today, Syria and Hezbollah, ISIS and Hamas head the list of threats against the nation of Israel.

During the days of King Manasseh's reign (roughly 700-645 BC), there was also a serious threat. It was Assyria, a vast empire located to the north and east of Israel.¹

The capitol of Assyria was Nineveh, an enormous city located near the Tigris River and between two mountain ranges.

Nineveh was known for its wealth, architecture, library, museums, sculptures, streets and boulevards.

Mostly, though, Nineveh was known for violence and cruelty. The Assyrian Empire was, at its core, a war machine, and the Assyrian army struck terror in the hearts of everyone in the Ancient Near East.

After defeating another nation in war, they would carry off much of the population into captivity, often with hooks in their flesh.

For the century before Manasseh, Assyria had been gobbling up nation after nation, growing stronger by the year as they marched their

¹ The capitol of the Assyrian Empire was Nineveh, the city to which the prophet Jonah was sent.

way across the Fertile Crescent toward the Mediterranean, toward Israel.²

While Manasseh was seated on Judah's throne as king, Assyria was poised to attack. Judah was Assyria's next military target.

Before proceeding, let me give you a brief rundown of how it was that Manasseh came to the throne.

Tracing a Line from Abraham to Manasseh

First, Manasseh came from good stock. He was a direct descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jews.

You can trace a line from Abraham to King David and then through all the kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, straight to Manasseh.

Second, one of the best kings of Judah was Hezekiah, Manasseh's father.³

The Life and Reign of Manasseh's Father (2 Kings 18)

Hezekiah followed the Lord

Hezekiah began his reign at age twenty-five, and the Bible tells us that **[2 Kings 18:3] He did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done.**

Hezekiah removed most of the idolatrous worship from the land and he also broke off evil, foreign alliances into which previous kings had entered.

² In the days of Manasseh, there had been some hope that Assyrian might was waning. The assassination of the powerful King Sennacherib, though, had not led to Assyria's weakening because Sennacherib's son, Esarhaddon, made the empire even more powerful. And Ashurbanipal, the next King, continued to increase Assyrian might.

³ We find Hezekiah's story in 2 Kings 18 (and 2 Chronicles 28).

He even **[7]...rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.**

This refusal to pay tribute to Assyria made the Assyrian king furious. It prompted them to march on the northern kingdom (Israel), to destroy its civilization, and to carry away many Jews into exile.

Hezekiah was delivered from Assyria

Assyria then tried to invade the southern kingdom of Judah, the kingdom over which Hezekiah ruled from Jerusalem.

But, in the days of Hezekiah, Assyria wasn't successful in her attempt to defeat Jerusalem.⁴

In 2 Kings 18 and 19, we read about God's protection of Judah when Assyria finally did attack. They camped all around Jerusalem. King Sennacherib's chief general (Rab-shekah) threatened Jerusalem with awful threats.

But Hezekiah poured his heart out to God, begging for deliverance. God answered in a miraculous way⁵ and what little was left of the Assyrian army was sent packing back to Nineveh.

Hezekiah healed by the Lord (a mixed blessing)

After this wonderful deliverance, Isaiah the prophet told Hezekiah that he needed to get his house in order because he was going to die soon.

Well, Hezekiah didn't want to die yet, so he begged for healing, which God granted.

⁴ Their attack was successful enough to prompt Judah to pay an annual amount of silver and gold as protection money, but Judah was not destroyed by Assyria. (She was later destroyed by Babylon.)

⁵ **[2 Kings 19:35] Then it happened that night that the angel of the Lord went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead.**

And we, who view Hezekiah's life with perfect 20/20 hindsight, wish that King Hezekiah had just gone ahead and died.

Why?

Well, after he was healed by the Lord, Hezekiah lived fifteen more years. During those fifteen years, he committed one tactical blunder and fathered one son, the combination of which made Judah's and Jerusalem's eventual destruction inevitable.

FIRST, his tactical blunder.

Hezekiah's final years

A tactical blunder

When a Babylonian delegation came to Jerusalem, the king showed them all of the store of treasure that was in the temple.

When the Babylonians saw the rich supply of gold and silver that was there, they decided that Jerusalem would be a nice plum to add to their collection of trophy nations.

From the day that Hezekiah showed them Judah's riches, Babylon was determined to conquer Judah. Less than a century and a half later, they did just that.

A son worth forgetting - Manasseh

SECOND, Hezekiah fathered a son: Manasseh.

The Bible summarizes Manasseh's reign this way: **[2 Kings 21:2] And he did evil in the sight of the LORD.**

He was twelve years old when he became king. And he wasn't shy about taking the reins of leadership.

Manasseh immediately introduced changes into the life of the nation, changes that would have made his father gag.

The Wicked Reign of King Manasseh

Idolatry and Immorality

After returning from his father's funeral, Manasseh changed from his mourning clothes to his kingly robe and began changing the nation. 2 Kings 21 catalogues the king's wicked changes.

High places rebuilt

First, he rebuilt the high places for the worship of other gods in Judah. In the ancient cultures of Canaan, worship had always taken place on the hills. It was supposed that the gods lived on the heights.

Hezekiah had destroyed these high places. They were abominations to the Lord. Manasseh liked them. He wanted the people to worship other gods on the high places.

A champion of idolatry

Then, in the temple itself, he erected an altar to Baal. Baal was the chief god of the Canaanites. Sometimes Baal is depicted as the storm god and sometimes as the god of ecstasy. The worship of Baal involved sexual immorality and violence and drunkenness.

Sexual perversion rules the day

Manasseh further directed the craftsmen of Jerusalem to carve Asherim. Asherah was a goddess of the Canaanites, the goddess of fertility and warfare.

The Asherim were sexually explicit representations of Asherah. (ancient pornography) Asherah was worshipped at temples and on high places through ritual prostitution. Manasseh encouraged the worship of Asherah in the Jerusalem temple.

Astrology

Not content with promoting the worship of the gods of the land of Canaan, Manasseh introduced a whole constellation of worship possibilities.

He encouraged the Jews to worship the sun, the moon, and the stars as if they were gods and goddesses. Manasseh set up altars for the worship of the host of heaven in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem.⁶

And Manasseh had yet more wickedness up his sleeve.

The Dark Arts

Scripture tells us that he introduced the dark arts of witchcraft, divination and sorcery to Judah. He brought back into Judah the mediums and sorcerers, the spiritists and wizards Hezekiah had removed.

Now, of course, all of this was in direct and explicit contradiction to what Moses had commanded in the Law.

But Manasseh was trying to move as far away from the Law of Moses and the heritage of godliness he had received from his father, Hezekiah, and from the ways of God as he could.

While all of it was against God's Word, some of the worship forms that Manasseh imported might not seem all that serious. Some of his innovations, though, were simply grotesque.

Human Sacrifice

The Bible tells us that **[2 Kings 21:6] he made his son pass through the fire.**

This means that he took up the practice of human sacrifice. While this was obviously an abomination in the sight of God, some of the surrounding nations had long engaged in human sacrifice.

⁶ In this, he was taking the Jews back to the practices of Abraham before he came to know the one true God.

The people of the Moabite and Ammonite nations would gather in front of a great furnace and work themselves into a frenzy and throw innocent children into the flames to appease hungry gods.

Manasseh encouraged this practice in Judah, even offering up his own son to the fire.

“Dissing” the Prophets

Despite all of this, God was patient with Manasseh. He continued to send prophets to him, warning of a coming judgment, exhorting him to repent, rebuking him for his rebellion.

Among these prophets was Isaiah, who, by the time of Manasseh, would have been a very old man. He had served Manasseh’s father, Hezekiah, and had been a great help to him.

But Manasseh wasn’t in a listening mood for whatever Isaiah might have had to say. He dismissed Isaiah’s message and that of all the other prophets, too.

In fact, more than just turning a deaf ear to Isaiah, Jewish tradition tells us that Manasseh was the one who actually killed Isaiah.⁷

We could drone on and on about Manasseh’s wickedness. Instead, though, let’s simply listen to Scripture’s summary of his fifty-five year reign.

Summary of Manasseh’s life: [2 Kings 21:2] *He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel... [16] Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; besides his sin with which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord.*

And that is the end of the story of Manasseh - at least as far as his story is told in the book of 2 Kings. The author of 2 Kings goes on to

⁷ By placing him in a hollow log and sawing him in two - see Hebrews 11, a likely reference to Isaiah.

immediately tell of the reign of Manasseh’s son, Amon (another terrible king), and then of the righteous reign of his grandson, Josiah.

But, when we turn to 2 Chronicles, we read of a second telling of Manasseh’s story. And we discover that Manasseh’s wickedness was not the end of the story.

Frequently, events are cited in either Kings or Chronicles which are not found in the other history.⁸ That is very much the case with Manasseh as there is a “rest of the story” story.

Manasseh’s Crisis (2 Chronicles 33)

God Delivered Manasseh to the Assyrians (2 Chronicles 33:11)

The first nine verses of 2 Chronicles 33 read just like what we saw in 2 Kings. It is a recounting of the evil deeds of Manasseh.

The chronicler, though, went on to record what 2 Kings did not.

[2 Chronicles 33:11] Therefore the Lord brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon.

God sent discipline against King Manasseh.

God saw to it that Assyrian soldiers who were known for their cruelty and idolatry and immorality should be the ones to afflict this king who was guilty of such cruelty and idolatry and immorality.

So, Manasseh got his just dessert. He got what he had coming to him. So, is this the end of his story? Listen again.

Manasseh Cried Out to God

⁸ The book of the Kings is not interested in bringing out the fact of Manasseh’s repentance, being more concerned to show why the monarchy fell. Chronicles, by contrast, was written to magnify the Davidic dynasty and to show that even a wicked king like Manasseh may experience God’s grace.

[12] When he was in distress, he entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

In the Apocrypha (which is a collection of books that are deemed beneficial, but not inspired), we have a record of Manasseh's prayer. There is no certainty that this was exactly what he prayed, but it is likely pretty close.

*"O Lord, God of our fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
And their righteous offspring
He who made the heaven and the earth with all their beauty...
You appointed grace for me - I who am a sinner -
Because my sins exceeded the number of the sands of the sea.
And now, O Lord, I am justly afflicted
And I am deservedly harassed
And I am bent by many iron chains.
I cannot lift up my head
Because of the gross iniquity of my wicked deeds,
Because I did evil things before you
And provoked your fury
And set up idols and multiplied impurity.
And now behold, I am bending the knees of my heart before you
And I am beseeching your kindness.
I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned;
And I certainly know my sins.
I beseech you;
Forgive me, O Lord, forgive me.
Do not be angry against me forever.
Do not remember my evils
And do not condemn me
Although I am not worthy."*

That is quite a prayer. It's a good prayer. But, will it matter? After a life lived as badly as Manasseh's, will God pay attention?

Will He say, *"Tough luck, bub, you should have prayed that prayer about a hundred human sacrifices ago."*

Or, what I might think more likely, *"Good prayer. Yes, I'll forgive you - but enjoy the rest of your days in Assyria, 'cuz that's where you're gonna stay!"*

So, what will God do, now that Manasseh has called out to Him? You've heard of "amazing grace"? Well...

God Forgave Manasseh!

[13] When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

Out of his affliction, with hooks in his flesh and chains wrapped around his head, Manasseh called out to God - and God listened. More than that. God ***"was moved by his entreaty."***

God forgave. God even restored. Manasseh was allowed to return to Jerusalem and to resume his reign as king of Judah.

Manasseh Became God's King

We don't know how much time he spent in Assyria. But after some time (perhaps years?), he returned.⁹

What thoughts must have gone through Manasseh's mind as he surveyed the wreckage of the city he had ruled - and the wreckage was his doing!

He saw a desecrated temple, false worship on every corner, violence and cruelty everywhere, injustice and impurity.

All the results of his own work. He now saw that his whole life had been given to a lie.

But God gave him another opportunity to rule and Manasseh was resolved to not waste this golden opportunity.

He had repented, and he worked out his repentance in righteous deeds and godly zeal.

⁹ As many have noted, he probably retraced Abraham's footsteps as he traveled across the Fertile Crescent to Haran, then to Damascus, and then south to Jerusalem.

His final years were a model of what God's king should do.

He built protective, high walls around the city.

[2 Chronicles 33:14] Now after this he built the outer wall of the city of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entrance of the Fish Gate; and he encircled the Ophel with it and made it very high. Then he put army commanders in all the fortified cities of Judah.

He also led in re-establishing right worship in the city and throughout the land.

[15] He also removed the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, as well as all the altars which he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside the city. [16] He set up the altar of the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it; and he ordered Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel.

Manasseh's first years on the throne were a thorough-going perversion. The prophets called him the most wicked king Judah had ever had - and so he was.

His repentance, though, is one of the highlights of biblical history. God forgave him, restored him and gave him the opportunity to serve Him again.

The end of his life was better than the beginning. Something that began pitiful was followed by something beautiful.

So it was with Manasseh - and so it was in the Sawtooths of Idaho.

Conclusion:

I've told you the ugly - hot, dry, dusty - first day. Well, that ugly Day One was followed by glorious Days Two through Five.

If we had survived that first day and decided, "*This stinks, let's go back to the car*" we would have missed the grandeur of God's handiwork in that very special part of His creation.

The fact is, you've got to get ten to fifteen miles away from the car before the beauty begins.

On the next days, we

- hiked heavily forested trails beside rivers flowing over enormous slabs of granite;
- saw gigantic waterfalls;
- camped at highland lakes brimming with trout visible from the shore;
- overlooked scenery that looked to be right out of the *Lord of the Rings*;
- saw spires and rock columns (called "hoodoos") shaped into fantastic forms by ages of storms.

A less than stellar beginning was redeemed by a glorious end.

Just like Manasseh's life - only in Manasseh's case, it wasn't a matter of continuing a hike until he got to the beautiful part of the trail. In Manasseh's case, the glorious end came because he learned one of the hardest and most crucial lessons life has to teach us.

He learned "The Law of Holes" which is, simply, that when you find yourself in one, stop digging.

Having spent the bulk of his life digging a deep hole of rebellion against God, He stopped digging, turned UP to God. Then, he found mercy, a chance for a do-over, a fresh start. In a word, repentance.

Now here is where this morning's time in God's Word gets pointed.

At the beginning, I asked you to consider your 2016 and to look in the rear-view mirror at the past and through the windshield to envision the future.

The purpose of a forward look and a rearward look is to consider changes we might make to serve God better in the future than we have in the past.

The point is to ask, *“What should I change? What turn do I need to make? What habits do I need to set aside? What path to purity do I need to begin following?”*

For you, a child of God, to pursue a life change and a radical shift; for you to set aside sin and pursue holiness is join Manasseh on the life-giving path of repentance.

Repent is exactly what Manasseh did when he humbled himself before God. He turned from his sin - and found the joy of obedience. When you turn from your sin, you will find that same joy.

Christians who become aware of sinful patterns in their lives repent. So, when you repent you will find yourself in great company.

Our church is made up of believers in Jesus who are deeply flawed, who are in chronic need of forgiveness, and hence, in chronic need of repentance. If repentance is what you need today, you couldn't be in a better place.

And if you are in need of repentance, you couldn't have been here on a better Sunday than this. There is no better story to have heard than the hope-filled story of Manasseh, the repentant king.

Finally, there is no better time than now to turn in humble repentance to the Lord who has been turning messy beginnings into beautiful endings from the beginning of time.