

Scripture and Sermon June 9

Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20 NRSV

⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵ and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."

⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷ and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸ Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹ Now then, listen to their voice; only--you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

¹⁰ So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;

¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰ so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: You Get What You Ask For (Sometimes)

You may realize this by now, but I love stories. I didn't fall in love with history until a professor in seminary taught history as a story. I fell in love with the Bible through the stories in it. And I am also a bit of a nerd. One of the first epic stories I fell in love with was J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*. The first time I read it, I got bored with it after the ring is destroyed and decided I didn't want to read another hundred pages of elvish poetry. So, I was astounded when I went back and read it the second time and found there was more to the story. (This happened to me a third time when I discovered the appendices.)

The Bible sometimes does the same thing to me. It is so big and complex that every once in a while, I feel like I stumble on another story in the Bible, one I hadn't noticed or read before – or read a story in a new way.

By the time I entered seminary, I thought I had read every story in the Bible. I had read the Bible in comic book form a jillion times (remember – nerd who loves story). And I had gone to Sunday School and church my entire life. But somehow, I had missed quite a few of the stories – some because they were considered too grown up for Sunday School, or too violent for church. Some because they made us Christians too uncomfortable.

One such story was the one we read at the beginning of this morning. Here we have a story of how the monarchy of Israel began. How Israel moved from a confederacy of tribes with an occasional warlord, or prophetic, or religious leader called a judge (like Samuel) to the monarchy of Saul to the Davidic kingdom and promise. Like anything where a large number of human beings want to have a say, it wasn't smooth sailing. In fact, the more you read about this time in the Scriptures the more you see how difficult the process was. In fact, there seem to be two side by side stories about this transition. One where everything is great and ordained by

God, and this one, where Samuel is resentful and reluctant, and God seems to be going along with what the silly uninformed humans think they want.

The passage we just read is the beginning of that story. The beginning of the story of how Israel became a monarchy. Now the rabbis have many different interpretations of why this decision was so controversial. Were the Israelites rejecting God and God's rule like it says, "and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (v. 7) But if having a king was so distressing to God then why was David the apple of God's eye? Just the second king of Israel is given the promise that the line of Davidic Kings will never end.

And remember who comes to fulfill that promise of Davidic kingship according to our Christian Scriptures. If God was so against Israel having a king would Jesus the messiah, the savior of the world, be descended from the kings. Why not have Jesus descended from the priests or from Moses if kings were so bad for Israel.

The rabbis suggest, it was not the idea of a king that distressed God, it was just in the way the Israelites asked, "so we can be like other nations." Israel was not supposed to be like other nations. Israel was supposed to be different – set apart. That was part of the purpose for all of the Laws – to set Israel apart from other people. They ate differently, they worked differently, they kept a sabbath, they were circumcised – different – set apart. They were not supposed to be like other nations. Israel is supposed to be a light to the world – a blessing to all the nations. Israel is supposed to be different, "not like the other nations."

Or perhaps the rabbis suggest that it was too early for Israel to have a king. The temple was supposed to be built first. Israel could have a king, but it just wasn't the right time. Other rabbis tell this story about a group of plants and trees, "The plants got together and wanted to declare a king – just like the animals had the lion as king – the plants wanted a king. So, they asked the olive tree to be king, but the olive tree said it couldn't be the ruler since it needed to put its time into growing tall and strong and producing its fruit. This took all the time of the olive tree. Next, they asked the grape vine to be king. But the grape vine was also too busy. Every year it needed to grow new vines and force life down the old vines to produce the best grapes for wine. Then they asked the fig tree, but again, the fig tree needed to spend its time producing the fruit which was its purpose. Finally, they turned to the thorn bush, which replied ominously, "why certainly I'll be your king – I have nothing better to do." The rabbis were trying to make the point that only those who are not busy producing good things for themselves and others have enough time to exert power over others.

This story is definitely similar to the warning God gives through Samuel about the cost of a king. Kings cost money. Governments cost money. A king needs a home. A warrior king needs an army – an army made up of the children of the nation. And on top of an army, kings need servants and lands and herds and well – kings need stuff. And all the stuff and the money to pay for the stuff and the money to keep the government running will all have to come from the nation. Kings have costs. Are you willing to pay the cost for a king, Samuel asks the tribal elders? Yes, they reply.

The scripture lesson ends here, but the story goes on and becomes ever more convoluted until eventually Saul, the first king dies, and David becomes the second king. We are left with the impression from this piece of the story that God doesn't necessarily want Israel to have a king but allows it anyway. That perhaps God sees all the problems Israel is bringing down on itself, but, well, Israel was growing up and needed to be able to make choices and to deal with the consequences of those choices – good or bad.

This is part of what it means to have free will. We get to make choices, individually and collectively, even when our choices may not be the choices God would have us make. Each one of us has been there. Either we have made a choice against our parent's better judgement, or a friend has, or a child has. And loathe as we

are to watch our friends and loved ones make what we consider to be bad choices, many times we need to let them make the choices and face the consequences. And sometimes the consequences surprise us. Sometimes the foolish choice wasn't so foolish.

A young man dropped out of Harvard to found a computer company. His lawyer parents were appalled. Can you imagine the conversations? Why can't you wait until you've got your degree before you do anything foolish? Surely if you can start a 'software' company now you can wait two years? At least then if you fail you will have a degree from Harvard!

Well, Bill Gates was that young man. He founded Microsoft and is one of the richest people in the world. What I am sure most of the world, including his parents saw as a foolish choice to drop out of Harvard wasn't so foolish – was it?

Samuel saw this choice for a king other than God as a foolish choice for Israel. His ambivalence, and Israel's is dramatically on display over the next few chapters where we have multiple traditions on how Saul was chosen to be king. Multiple traditions on Saul's abilities as king of Israel. Even multiple traditions on how David became known to Samuel and Saul – and the relationships between these three leaders of Israel – the last judge, the first king, and the king whose line was blessed by God to eventually bless us – with Jesus.

Was Israel foolish to ask for a king – to be like other nations? Perhaps. But ultimately even though God gave the Israelites what they asked for. Even though God allowed Israel to have free will and to make choices for how they wanted to be governed – it didn't – it couldn't derail the ultimate plan of God. Israel was still the chosen people of God – set apart – a light and blessing to the nations – and God's plan of salvation still happened – is happening – no matter what 'foolish' choices we might make along the way.