

June 9th, 2024

1 Samuel 8:4-22 “Give Us a King!”

Sometimes the church needs to be reminded that God has blessed us with the gift of free will and free choice. It's part of the beauty of being human. In Genesis 2, the writer tells the story of how God placed humans in a Garden called Eden to “till it and keep it.” God also told the humans, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” For a time, things went well for the humans, but along came this serpent who said, “You know, the only reason God doesn't want you to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that if you do, you'll become like God.” Notice the serpent did not force the humans to eat from the tree. The serpent simply said, “Listen, you *can* eat the fruit from that tree if you want. Why would God put it in the garden in the first place? You are the stewards of this garden, right? So if you want to eat the fruit, go ahead. It looks yummy, doesn't it?” And the humans ate it even though God told them not to. God confronted them and said, “Didn't I tell you not to eat from that tree?” The humans said, “Yes.” God said, “Then why did you eat from it?” And of course, the humans started pointing fingers and blaming each other. The woman said, “The serpent made me do it!” The man said, “the woman who you gave me made me do it!” And

they were exiled from the garden, probably still blaming each other on their way out. “It’s your fault.” “No it’s your fault.” “No it’s your fault.” This is the story that my Sunday School teacher referred to when any of his students asked, “Why didn’t God just create humans to always do the right thing?” Because being able to choose right from wrong is what makes us human. It sets us apart from all other creatures on the earth. Free choice is necessary to be fully human.

Last week we were introduced to the prophet Samuel who was the surrogate son of Eli, one of Israel’s Judges. At the time, Israel was a federation of twelve tribes who had an odd way of governing themselves, at least when you compare them to other nations in that region of the world. Eli was having a hard time governing in part because his two sons were misusing the power that came along with being the children of one of Israel’s judges. Eli was also going blind and was having a hard time dealing with his own issues let alone the issues of the people he was called to govern. Samuel, at the tender age of about 12 years old, was called by God to be a prophet, and the first thing he was told to do was tell his surrogate father Eli that God was going to bring down his house thus ending his time as Judge in Israel. What a way to start a job. I, at the age of 31, accepted a call to be the Associate Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Virginia. It became my job to flip our region’s camp around so that

it would make a profit after 15 years of running a deficit. I was also told to “rein in” the high-school age camp because over the years it had gotten out of control and churches started withdrawing their support to the regional church because, and I quote, “Our congregations are not happy that many of the campers they send to church camp come back reporting that they had their first cigarette.” I was also assigned to provide staff oversight to the regional clergy committee where I had to watch a person I went to college and seminary with lose their standing for an ethics violation. Easy job, right?

But listen, my challenges were miniscule compared to the Prophet Samuel’s. The final verse of our scripture lesson last week was, “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.” He earned Israel’s trust. His occupation went from being a 12-year-old prophet who witnessed the downfall of Eli to a strange combination of a priest, prophet, and judge. To this day, Samuel is recognized in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as one of the greatest prophets who ever lived. But talk about someone who had problems! It took me about three years to turn the camp around in Virginia. Samuel’s task was to defeat the Philistines, get the Ark of the Covenant back, and establish peace in Israel. It took him about 20 years, but then things started to go south. Over time, Samuel realized that it was a lot of work holding down three jobs. So he said, “Well, I’ll just

appoint my two sons to be judges. I'm getting too old for that job anyway. Besides, these are my kids. What could go wrong?" Well, as it happened, Samuel's sons were yahoos, just like Eli's sons. I'm sure Samuel didn't appreciate the irony that he didn't have any more control over his sons than his old mentor Eli had over his. And guess who wasn't happy about Samuel's sons being yahoos? The people of Israel. What is it about people holding leaders responsible for their kids' sins? Good thing we don't do that anymore, right? But in this case, I see Israel's point. Samuel appointed his kids to be judges and their poor choices had a direct impact on Israel's safety. So Israel's tribal leaders got together and came up with a plan for how they were to be governed. They concluded that Samuel should appoint a king. The problem is, the Law of Moses made it clear that God was the only King of Israel and Judges were to carry out the King's commands. But Israel decided that wasn't working, so they demanded a king. Why? Verses 19 and 20 address that question. The tribal leaders said, "We are determined to have a king over us, *so that we also may be like other nations.*"

Why do we humans think the grass is always greener on the other side of the border? You may have a perfectly good, tried-and-true way of governing, but the minute you face a challenge it's, "Oh, look at this dictator over here! He doesn't let his people get away with dissent. He keeps

them in line! We should be like him!” That’s what was happening here in Israel. God told Samuel to tell the people what a disastrous idea their plan would be and to remind them what happens to nations who have human kings. Human kings are corruptible. A human king will take your sons away from you to fight his battles, he’ll take your daughters away to care for his armies, he’ll take your crops and herds from you so he can build his empire. Then he’ll start giving his friends special privileges. Then you’ll have an oligarchy where the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer and you’ll end up with a nation that’s irreparably polarized, and you’ll be the target for every empire in the region. Don’t do it. In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses told the people of Israel,

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors.”

Samuel did his best to remind the tribal leaders how disastrous it would be to have a King. But the leaders rejected him and said, “No, we can make this work! We

want a king! We'll be different!" And you know what God said despite Samuel's protests? God said, "Alright. Let them have a king. It's their choice." What!? You've got to be kidding! That's not the way it's supposed to work! You need to intervene God! They'll screw this up! No. It's *their* choice.

That must have been difficult and even painful for Samuel. I wonder if he thought, "This is my fault for appointing my sons to be judges. If only I'd seen the red flags ahead of time. If only I had reined them in before things got so bad!" But this isn't an unusual problem for parents. No matter how hard we've worked to raise our kids to have a good moral foundation, sometimes they choose the path of the yahoo. Think about how many stories and parables and plays and books and movies involve kids who have rebelled or brought shame to their family because they made bad choices even if they were raised to make good choices! Again, free will is necessary to being fully human.

What does it take for a church to be prophetic? That's the question that started this whole series. And so far, the answer to that question is, "A *lot*." It takes a lot to be a prophetic voice in this world. I empathize with Samuel. What was it like to be a prophet, constantly mediating between God and God's people? To be a representative of the people for God and to speak on their behalf. To

remind the people that it was God who saved them from bondage. It must have been exhausting. For generations God had promised the people that God would be the people's God, the center of their universe, their protector, their king. And now the people started looking to other nations who had kings, and they felt like they were missing out. So the people complained. They protested. They pleaded. They whined. And they argued with Samuel that a king was necessary to govern them. And God responded to them by saying, "Okay."

For some reason, many churches in this era of history today ... not just here in our country but around the world ... feel that to be faithful to their calling, they have to take choices away from people by gaining control over certain aspects of their lives. Rather than spreading the gospel message through service and love, as Jesus taught, they seek to impose it by force. There's a movement taking place in some Christian circles these days called the "seven mountain mandate" that believes the best way to introduce people to the Good News of Jesus is by taking control of seven aspects of society: family, religion, education, media, arts, business and government. You might say, "Wow. That's a good idea!" And then you might say, "But wait, that also sounds like what happened back in the 70s when fundamentalist Muslim clerics took control of Iran." Yeah, it sure does. It also sounds like what fundamentalist Buddhists did in Myanmar. And the

list goes on. Nothing good ever comes out of that kind of “evangelism.” We should have learned that lesson from Emperor Constantine who replaced the word of God with a sword and shield.

And then when anyone pushes back or anyone reminds them that free will and choice is a part of God’s design the people say, “Oh! We’re being persecuted because of our religion!” Let’s remember that religious persecution is when you are prevented from *exercising* your beliefs, not when you are prevented from *imposing* your beliefs.” Would the world be a better place if you could “make” people do things? Would life be easier if people all made the same good choices? Yes. Are some of the choices people make not good? Sure. They may be destructive to the person making them. But so long as those choices don’t infringe upon the rights and safety of others, it’s still a part of God’s design that the ability to choose is there.

As always – this all sounds good on paper, but using the Bible as a club never works, and ends up undermining God’s message of love. Samuel is just getting started. He’s going to have his hands full – God said, “Let them have a king,” and they did, and things blew up right out of the gate. But God can redeem anything. God works with us to return us to God and redeem things. That’s the beauty of having free will, and we would do well to remember this as individuals and as a nation.