

June 13th, 2021

1 Samuel 8:4-20 “Who Needs a King Anyway?”

The lectionary gave me a beautiful gift for the summer of 2021. All of the Old Testament lessons for the next several weeks are from the book of 1 and 2 Samuel. This made me happy because I’m still surfing on that good 1 Samuel energy left over from our last Bible Study group, and I’m excited to dive into 2 Samuel this week after our three-month break. Don’t tell me that the Holy Spirit doesn’t work through the New Common Lectionary. It does. This is going to be fun. This morning’s reading was fairly long, but it’s pretty straightforward when you look at the big picture. This story marked a major turning point in the history of Israel. This is where the people of Israel said they wanted a king so that they could be like the other nations in the land. This did *not*, however, fit in with the plan that God had for Israel. Both the blessing and burden of living in a covenant relationship with God is that God honors humans’ freedom of choice ... even when our choices are bad.

So, I guess the first question we need to address this morning is, “What’s so bad about having a king?” Well, we could come up with a *huge* list of reasons here in this room, right? After all, our nation was founded because we rejected the idea of a monarchy. But I want you to put that aside for now and think like ancient middle eastern people. Back then, there weren’t very many examples of nations who functioned without a monarch. There were plenty of little tribal confederacies out there who had different ways of governing themselves, including Israel, but when it came to the “big boys” like Babylon, Persia and Egypt, monarchies were the standard. For a good while, Israel was ruled by Judges. The most famous ones, or at least the ones who had the most exciting stories in the Bible, were Samson, Deborah and Gideon. The reason Israel had judges has to do with covenantal governance which is what we talked about last week. There’s no top-down hierarchical structure in a covenantal system. The judges arose as God saw fit to lead people to a right relationship with God which, in turn, would enable them to resist and overcome their enemies. The judges did not inherit their position

like kings do. There was no dynasty. The leaders were mostly called by God and confirmed by the priests. And, for the most part, that seemed to work *great* for Israel's tribal confederacy. But from day one, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great *nation* whose population would outnumber the stars and that Israel would be a blessing to all other nations. God also made it clear that Israel did not need a king to accomplish this. In fact, Israel wouldn't need a lot of things that were common to the nations in the middle eastern world. Israel's whole identity was established on the belief that God set them apart from everyone else. They were to reject the ways of the other nations so they could remain set apart or to use a more priestly term, "holy."

And yet, here we are reading a story about Israel demanding a king. Why? Because they wanted to be like the other nations! Even though the whole point and purpose of their very existence was to *not* be like all the other nations. Can you see why God was so frustrated with them sometimes? And again, another thing that set the Israelites apart was that their God not only gave them free choice but *honored* their choices ... even the bad ones. Here's a quick summary of today's scripture in case you feel bogged down by all the details – The people said, "We want a king so we can be a great nation." God said, "You don't need a king to be a great nation." The people said, "We don't care! We want to be like everyone else!" God said, "Okay, but this is going to come back and bite you in the tushy someday." And it did.

Here's what I want us to consider this morning, and it's right here in the sermon title already – "Who needs a king anyway?" Why would *anyone* want a king? It sounds like a terrible idea. In a monarchy, there are typically two ways to get a new king. The first way is when the current king dies one of the king's children assumes the throne. The second way is when someone rises up and kills the king in order to assume control of the throne. In both cases, the people don't have much choice in the matter. Let's say you have a king that the people love. This king is benevolent, just, a good diplomat, and puts the people first. He has all of the qualities that make a good king. Great! But what happens when

the good king dies and the next child in the line of succession is a selfish, petulant, warmongering brat who doesn't care about the well-being of the people? What do you do about it? Well, if you want things to change that badly, you've got to find someone who is willing to rise up and take control of the throne. But it may be that the *new* King isn't so great either, but comparatively speaking, he's a heck of a lot better than the one that was there. Which leads to a third way to get a new king which is to spend all your time, resources and energy dealing with internal conflicts until another nation comes along and assimilates your kingdom into theirs. It becomes a "game of thrones" where nobody wins and the common people end up being collateral damage.

And in our scripture this morning, Samuel really tries to get the Israelites to see this too. He says, "Listen. You want a king so you can be like all the other nations? Bad idea because you're going to end up like all the other nations. You'll end up with a king who will draft your sons and appoint them to his chariots and horsemen!" Wait a minute, Israel doesn't have chariots! We've *never* needed chariots! Well you will now, because kings have to have chariots in order to go out and fight the armies that do! And the king's army will turn into a hungry beast that needs to be fed. Literally! That means the king will need slaves to harvest the crops that would normally be grown by the people he drafted. You need land to grow crops, so that means you need to find ways to get more land or to re-purpose the land you already have.

Here's another thing that a king will do. A king will need slaves to feed the military beast. "But wait, we came out of slavery in Egypt so we could be here! We can't have slaves!" If you're going to be like the other nations you will. And here's another thing - the artisan class will be drafted to make weapons out of resources that would normally be used to make farming implements! Then the king will come in and take 10% of everything you produce. "But wait, isn't God supposed to get 10% of what we produce?" Yup. But if you want a king, the king is going to have to take what is God's in order to be like all these other nations. "So, we'll be short-changing God?" That's exactly what will

happen. “Well ... I guess you gotta do what you gotta do, right? Give us a king!” Okay, but you’ve got to realize that on the day that you cry out to God because of the disaster that will inevitably come out of this, God isn’t going to answer. “Fine. It’s more important that we become like the other nations so we can be a force to be reckoned with.”

And thus history repeats itself over and over and over again. Why? Because people, especially groups of people who feel like they don’t wield any power, want to be like someone else. Okay, Jesse, how does this apply to the church? Glad you asked. Here’s a question for you – How often do we as a church look at other churches and say, “Wow. I wish we had what they had.” Be honest. I wish we had their resources. I wish we had their building. I wish we had the staff and resources for their Christian Education program. I wish we had their technology and their equipment and their ability to use it. I wish we had all of their young people. I wish we had their young, attractive, charismatic ministers.

But here’s the reality. The vast majority of churches anywhere are fairly small and are just getting by. And most of these churches are faithful in their service too. They have ministries that they’re passionate about. They operate food pantries, they help folks out who are in need, they use their facilities to partner with other organizations that do “Jesus work.” And yet many of them feel like they want to be like “those other churches” who are putting on big shows, filling up auditoriums and stadiums and drawing hundreds and thousands of people. Throughout the pandemic, we had churches that wanted to be meeting like other churches were. “Why can’t we sing and have these big bands?” There’s an inherent tendency in churches to wish they could be like other churches. Or as the people of Israel said, “I wish we could be like these other nations that have these great chariots and have these kings that write fabulous books and have big, giant, budgets and productions.” But our call is to faithfulness. We are not called to build the great chariots or have the big programs or have the great armies or the “kingly warrior king.” We are called to be shepherds and to be faithful and to keep

looking to God to help us do those simple, faithful acts of community building that we have all been commissioned to do.

We are not called to envy those who we wish we were like. We are called to proclaim the good news ... we are called to love God and to love our neighbor. That should be our focus- not trying to copy others. If we grow by leaps and bounds and have to start holding multiple services or meet in an auditorium, that should only be a byproduct of our faithfulness, not our goal. Samuel resisted the gimmick theology and politics of his day which was monarchy. What religious and political gimmicks are we being tempted by which distract us from God? As we face an uncertain post-pandemic future- are we asking the right question, which is: How can we follow God and walk with God more faithfully?