

July 8th, 2024

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 “United Under God”

Back in June we started a series about how Israel went from being a loose federation of tribes ruled by tribal elders and judges to a monarchy ruled by a king. We started out with the prophet Samuel warning Israel not to make hasty decisions about how they should govern themselves just because they were dissatisfied with one of their judges. However, the people thought that the solution to all their problems was to do away with the current system and appoint a king so that they could be like the other nations. And I get that. Israel was kind of the weirdo on the block when compared to the surrounding nations. Everyone else had a king, but Jewish Law made it clear that God was Israel’s king and that they could operate as a nation with tribal elders and judges who carried out God’s agenda. But they had this judge named Eli who just wasn’t cutting it so, as usual, the people decided that they knew better than God and insisted on appointing a king. God, who always gives humans free choice, even when their choices are bad said, “yes” and allowed them have a king. It was no surprise that their first king, Saul, was a disaster. As God’s prophet Samuel warned the people, “When you have a king, you’ll have king problems.” And boy-howdy did Saul cause problems. Compared to Eli who was just a guy who had too many irons in the fire and whose sons were yahoos, Saul was a selfish, arrogant, narcissistic, volatile tyrant who ended up making Israel a target for neighboring nations who were seeking to build their empires. They were thinking, “Hot dog, we can take this joker!” Fortunately, God is in the redemption business and decided that if the people insisted that they wanted a king, they should at least have a decent king who would rule in a way that was in alignment with God’s values. So with the prophet Samuel’s help, God chose David, a young sheep herder, to be Israel’s king. The problem is that Saul was still king when God chose David which stirred up all sorts of geopolitical drama that I’m afraid we missed when I was away at camp. Let me rephrase that. We missed a lot of *biblical* geopolitical drama that the lectionary gave us when I was away at camp. So let’s just

skip over all of the Saul and David drama and move on to this week's lectionary text where David officially becomes king of Israel.

I was in Israel for a short time back in 1995. I was chosen as one of five representatives from my seminary to join two other seminaries for a tour of the Middle East. In fact, that's what it was called – the Middle East Travel Seminar, or “METS.” It was sponsored by the Pattillo Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia which had close ties to former president Jimmy Carter who had always been invested in working towards peace in the Middle East. We were one of two groups of fifteen seminarians and five lay people that traveled through Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Israel and Greece to learn about the history, archaeology, and the geopolitical circumstances of the places we visited. We took our tour six months before Israeli Prime Minister Itzak Rabim was assassinated, so we were fortunate enough to visit many sites that were taken off the tour the following year because of safety concerns. We visited bronze age archaeological sites as well as iron age and crusader era sites. It was physically and academically demanding because we often visited several significant sites in a single day and ended the day with a lecture or a workshop. One day we visited some Roman-era ruins in far eastern Syria near the Iraqi border, a crusader castle north of Damascus, and ended the day listening to a lecture about how Haffaz Al-Asad, the king of Syria at the time, came to power. This all happened during the last two weeks of May and the first two weeks of June with very few breaks for purely recreational activities. It was still fun though.

Of the three and a half weeks we were trudging around in the Middle East, we only spent three days in Jerusalem. But talk about a place with interesting archaeological sites! We got to see the water shaft that David and his army used to capture Jerusalem. Or at least most scholars believe it was the water shaft David's army used. Regardless, there was something special about walking in the places that I read about in the Bible. The most educational part of those three days in Jerusalem was in the evenings when we got to hear how difficult it is to keep peace in that region. We heard from three different scholars: A Jewish professor, a

Muslim Palestinian and a Palestinian Christian. If you've been wondering why I haven't said much on the current conflict between Jews and Palestinians, you can trace it back to those three days I had in Jerusalem. I learned that there are four things one has to consider before taking sides in any conflict in that region. 1.) There are always more than two sides involved. 2.) There are multiple nations who really don't care about who is right or wrong but are highly invested in keeping this region in a state of chaos and conflict. 3.) The origins of this conflict go back thousands of years. Not decades. Not hundreds of years. Thousands. Way before Muhammed, way before Christ. 4.) Every action and reaction in this region is simultaneously oversimplified and overcomplicated. There are no easy answers, no easy solutions, and nothing is "black and white." As the Apostle Paul told the church in Ephesus, this isn't a conflict rooted in flesh and blood. It involves powers and principalities and spiritual wickedness at the highest levels. Different churches, different political leaders and different schools of thought will tell you that you can only be on one side or the other ... that you've got to pick a team and be loyal to that team no matter what. The wicked powers and principalities at the highest levels count on people to pick only one side. What those powers and principalities do not want are people to be unified in their pursuit of peace. And yet unity is what is necessary to achieve peace.

Back to our scripture. David, a shepherd boy who was literally out in the field tending sheep when God called him, was anointed by the Prophet Samuel to be king of Israel while Saul was still king. David's first test was to prove himself on the battlefield against the Philistine warrior Goliath. David didn't defeat Goliath in the traditional way of a warrior king. He couldn't even wear armor or lift a sword. He used a sling and stone -- the weapon that shepherds use to protect their flock from predators. It was God's way of saying, "This is the kind of king Israel needs. One who, like me, will care for my people like a shepherd." The fight with Goliath was a lesson about using one's power to protect the vulnerable from that which would destroy them. Think about how many Hebrew leaders began as shepherds: Rebekah, Joseph, Moses, David,

and later the prophet Amos. Oh, and don't forget about Jesus who referred to himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Remember the movie *Peaceful Warrior* that we watched a few months ago in Faith and Films? That's what David was. David was set up to be an earthly reflection of God even though God's divine plan from the beginning did not include a king. When the people demanded a king, they got a taste of what a bad king was all about. Now, with David, they had the opportunity to see how a shepherd king could be different from your standard run-of-the-mill king.

Shepherds are called to both nurture and lead. They've got to care for the most vulnerable sheep in the herd, but they've also got to guide the rest of the flock so they can flourish. Again, shepherds have to be both nurturing and leading. They have to be both comforting and challenging. They have to protect the flock *and* hold them accountable. So it was with David's reign. Before David, Israel was a mess. They were not united. They were nothing more than a bunch of rivaling tribes who didn't know what they wanted and who thought they knew better than God. Under Saul's reign they were not only engaged in war with other nations, they were also engaged in civil war with each other. The Philistines were poised and ready to swoop in and take these fools out. You know that phrase, "United we stand, divided we fall?" Patrick Henry, the first post-colonial governor of Virginia coined that phrase. Israel was on the verge of collapsing before David became king. Why? Because they were not united. But under David, the people came together. Was it because he was the strongest, biggest, bravest leader the world had ever seen? No. God surprised everyone with this unlikely choice for Israel's king. It was only by God's power that David succeeded as well as he did. The last verse of our reading today praises David, but credits God for the victory. "David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." We know from later stories that David was by no means a perfect king, but he sought God in all he did.

As King, David ended up healing and reforming the nation of Israel. He was able to overcome the division, albeit temporarily, because he had already built a foundation of relationships with and between the people. He had shown a history of good, solid leadership. And he put the needs of the greater community before himself and Judah, his own tribe.

His reign is considered the golden age for ancient Israel. David's reign only lasted 40 years. His son, Solomon, managed to be more or less faithful to David's model of leadership for another 40 years, but as soon as Solomon's son Rehoboam ascended to the throne, Israel became divided again literally ... by land ... and it stayed that way for generations until the Babylonians conquered the divided kingdoms and exiled the ruling class to the Babylonian homeland. Notice how little time it takes for people who are united and in alignment with God to crash and burn? Powers and principalities, folks. There is nothing that the forces of wickedness hate more than when people are united in their desire to be in alignment with God. Remember what I said a few weeks ago about how history plays out in cycles? Where are we in that cycle?

In the book of Ecclesiastes which is probably the most soberingly adult piece of wisdom literature in the Bible, the author writes –

All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance

of people yet to come
by those who come after them. (Ecclesiastes 1:8-11)

There is a purpose to these lessons that we've been reading about in 1 and 2 Samuel. They were meant to teach us how to be in alignment with God and what happens when we are not. And you know what? There *are* times when we are united and in alignment with God. But it doesn't take long for the powers and principalities to regroup and for the cycle to begin again. It is time for the church to unite in building a credible foundation for unity in our community. The difference between what the people of Israel under David had and what we have today is that our source of unity is Christ. That's what we're all about in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We believe that unity in Christ is our polar star. We believe that "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. That's our denomination's identity statement, and I believe that in this particular season of history, we have an opportunity to break the cycle of wickedness and be uniters under God through Christ our Good Shepherd. So may it be and so say we all.