

Today I am going to read one of those Scriptures that mentions a lot of names and assumes knowledge of a lot of history and it's one of those passages where you might be tempted to tune out and begin to hear me with a Charlie Brown teacher voice. What I need is for you to trust me...and stick with me...I promise I will connect the dots.

I am reading from the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament. Samuel is the one who was called by God to help identify a leader for God's people.

Before we hear the Scripture, please join in prayer:

Open us to your word, O God, so that what might sound at first like ancient history can – by your Spirit – speak into our present in the way we know the Scripture can do. We ask it in faith and in Christ's name. Amen.

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Samuel said to the people, 'The Lord is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore take your stand, so that I may enter into judgement with you before the Lord, and I will declare to you all the saving deeds of the Lord that he performed for you and for your ancestors. When Jacob went into Egypt and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your ancestors cried to the Lord and the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt, and settled them in this place. But they forgot the Lord their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of King Jabin of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. Then they cried to the Lord, and said, "We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served the Baals and the Astartes; but now rescue us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you." And the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Barak, and Jephthah, and Samson, and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you lived in safety. But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, "No, but a king shall reign over us", though the Lord your God was your king. See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves.'

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Okay. Let me remind us all of a little history that will help to understand what is going on in this Scripture.

You remember Moses, right?

Moses helped deliver God’s people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land.

Tracking so far?

Good. When God’s people got to the Promised Land – they settled it – and then two things happened: the people began to grow in number, and more and more time passed.

God’s people started families; they started trading with the locals; they created a life for themselves. It wasn’t too long before the subsequent generations of God’s people started to *forget* who it was that delivered them out of slavery...who it was that led them through the wilderness for forty long years...who it was that provided for them along the way...indeed, who provided them the land that they now called their own.

One minor, inconvenient detail was that, before God’s people arrived in it, the Promised Land was settled by someone else. Over the course of those early years of establishing themselves as a nation, this meant two things for God’s people: (1) it meant they were exposed to different things: ways of living, ways of worship, different values, different ways of being governed, and (2) it meant that they developed new enemies; people who were not thrilled at the ways God’s people laid claim to a land that they considered to be theirs.

You heard mention of some of those enemies in the passage I just read. Some of them might not be familiar – the people of Hazor (I don’t think I remember them, and I’m supposed to know this stuff). Others have names you might remember: the people of Moab, and the Philistines (the most famous Philistine being Goliath). As God’s people looked back on the early years of settling into the Promised Land, they interpret the times they were attacked by these new enemies as God’s judgement...as evidence of the fact that they were not living faithfully...that they had been corrupted by the things they were exposed to in this new land: different Gods, different values, different ways of being. Recognizing the ways they sinned, God’s people ask him to save them once again from the hands of these enemies so that they can establish themselves as a nation.

And, speaking of establishing themselves as a nation, here’s the other thing about this passage that might not be immediately obvious to you, but that is really important: as the people of God grow, and develop, and integrate themselves into this new, Promised Land – their needs change when it comes to who can effectively lead them.

When they were being led out of Egypt and through the wilderness, they had one leader – Moses...with his assistant, Aaron. You might remember that, part-way through their journey in the wilderness, Moses gets tired and asks God to give him some help for the leadership load he was having to carry. That’s where we get

idea for Elders from...God takes some of the responsibilities for leading the people off of Moses' shoulders and shares it with the Elders of the people.

Once they get into the Promised Land – there becomes a need for an Army. So Joshua becomes the leader and a general, commanding the troops.

Once they begin to populate the Promised Land and divide into identifiable tribes, there becomes a need for judges to help keep order and to ensure God's people maintain their identity. You might remember some of those names: Samson, Deborah, Gideon...

...and all of that leads to what I read this morning.

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The last of judges was Samuel. By the time Samuel was a judge, the people had decided they wanted something different...something that, in their minds, was better. By then, they had seen how other nations did things. They saw that other nations had kings – and they learned to associate those kings with things like power, wealth, sophistication, stability, and importance.

To a Bible-dork like me, what is really fascinating about this moment in Israel's history is that there is this discussion – between the people on the one hand, and God – represented by Samuel – on the other. There are a couple of things I find fascinating about that¹.

One is that the relationship between God and God's people is dynamic. I think sometimes we think about God as a divine being who decrees things and just lets us know how things are going to be. But I would challenge us to read our Bibles more closely. The whole point of the Bible is to describe the relationship that God has with God's people. And in a relationship, there is discussion and compromise. There are good decisions, and bad decisions...that cause the need to repair the relationship. In relationships trust is required – and there is this delicate dance between what one person wants and what the other person thinks that might be different than what the other person wants.

From the first page of Scripture to the last, we see evidence of God's dynamic relationship with God's people...and, time and time again, when there is damage to that relationship – God makes it right with promise after promise after promise.

¹ While I am not quoting him in this sermon, the person who needs a footnote is Dr. Walter Brueggemann – my Old Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. Dr. Brueggemann shaped my thinking on the dynamic relationship between God and God's people – and opened my eyes to the presence of an anti-monarch narrative in the Old Testament that is represented by this sermon.

That is one thing that I find fascinating about the moment that gets captured by today’s Scripture.

The other thing I find fascinating is the discussion itself.

The people want a king.

God thinks that a king is a bad idea.

In the end, the people get what they want.

And it turns out that God’s warnings about a king were on point.

Sometimes, that is how decisions in relationships work.

What God knew was that when the people project their hopes and dreams of power and wealth and stability and security and sophistication and importance on a person who is perched on a throne – it doesn’t take long for that house of cards to crumble.

What God knew was that when leadership and governance moved from being a function of order and accountability and representation on the one hand – to an exercise in pageantry and triumph...of pride and ego on the other – it would mean, ironically, that what the people said they wanted in a king would lead to their own demise because...ultimately...what the king cares about most isn’t the people, but the king.

Concerns notwithstanding, through Samuel, God gave the people what they wanted. First, it was an underwhelming king named Saul. Then, it was a king named David – who, in many ways, was the highlight of the time of the monarchy in Israel...though David was corrupted by his power, too. Solomon was next...he built the temple which became a source of national pride.

I won’t go on, but things began to devolve. You know how, in this morning’s Scripture, it read, “if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well...” Yeah...that didn’t happen. By the time Jesus arrives on the scene, the King of Israel was a puppet of the Roman empire and, one could argue, the people of God were back to being slaves...this time, not of Egypt, but of Rome.

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It’s beyond presumptuous for anyone – especially me – to speculate about what God thinks – but, if I understand the text – for God, the problem with a King is that it diminishes the people. Having a King can confuse the people about who they are to worship and serve. Having a King can mislead the people about who is to receive credit for the path that has led them to where they are. Having a King can blind people to God’s vision because the focus too often turns toward the King’s vision.

What matters to God is the relationship.

“Taking Back our Story: A People of Provision”

Rev. Pen Peery

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Kings obscure that relationship because the people begin to think they depend on the King instead of on the one who provided their very breath.

And yet – even when that happens – God continues to be faithful – and to stay in relationship with us.

I know it’s taken me a long time to get here in this sermon, but what I hope you notice is that this morning’s Scripture doesn’t take away the people’s prerogative and right to choose who will lead them.

It just gives us a warning.

A word of caution:

No one whom we choose to lead us can deliver us.

No one whom we choose to lead us can provide for our every need.

No one whom we choose to lead us can know us like the one who knit us together in our mother’s wombs.

Only God can do that.

And in the season that we find ourselves – where both sides of the aisle argue that who is on the ballot represents an existential choice between hope and despair, between good and evil, between life and death...I think as people of faith we would do well to remember that we don’t have to vote on that.

Because we trust that God will make all things well.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.