

B Lectionary 10 6.9.24

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20

Focus Statement: God tries new things for us.

Last week I mentioned that over the summer we'll be reading the stories of the first kings of Israel, and I made an offhand comment that God didn't think the whole "Israel having a king" thing was that great of an idea. Today we get the passage that makes God's hesitancy clear. To catch us up to speed, because 1 Samuel moves fast, last week in chapter three, Samuel was a boy studying to be a priest under Eli. Now, five chapters later, Samuel is all grown up with sons of his own. And, like his predecessor Eli, while Samuel by all accounts has been a good and faithful judge and priest for the people, Samuel's sons were not so great. Verse three, immediately before our reading started, says, "[Samuel's] sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." Samuel's sons, like Eli's sons, have grown up to be the sort of people Hannah spoke against in her song of praise in chapter two, when she sang of how "the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail." Basically, we once again find ourselves where we were last week, with a priest in need of a successor, an opening in the position of principle judge and priest of Israel.

Only, the world has changed since the time of Eli. Israel for generations had identified themselves as people of the covenant, the covenant being the promise God made to Abraham that Abraham's descendants would outnumber the stars, and that God would be their ruler and would bless them to be a blessing for the world. Moses, Joshua, even this system of judges were not true rulers of Israel, only God was their ruler, they were simply there to help mediate disputes that weren't worth bringing to the Almighty. And that

system had worked when they were a people on the road, in exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, and it had worked when they were first settling into Canaan, dividing into tribes, and building their society. But things had changed, both internally and externally, and there was a need for a different form of government. Externally, Israel was facing attack from the Philistines, a culture of traveling warriors. The elders hoped that by uniting the tribes under a single leader, they would be stronger against this force.

Internally, though, is where things were interesting. First there was the problem of succession. Two generations in a row the sons of the leader had not been good choices to take over as leader. Now, how anyone thought a monarchy was the solution to this problem, I don't know. Monarchies are, by definition, passed down through families, so this was not going to solve that problem. But a lot of this whole "we want a king" idea was half-baked, so it's not surprising they didn't think through that detail. The other internal change was, Israel was growing, both in wealth and population. There were more people to manage, and some of those people had money, money they wanted to protect. And, the covenant relationship God had with God's people had set within it protections for the poor against the wealthy and powerful. The fact that Samuel rattled off a whole list of "bad things kings will do" and the elders were totally unconcerned, seems to indicate that the people rallying for a king were those wealthy and powerful people, and they thought a king would be on their side, and would help them hang onto what they had, even at the expense of the rest of the community. Power supports and bolsters power. If these tensions sound familiar, here's why the Bible is still relevant three-thousand years later. We are reading about the establishment of a monarchy in 1000 BCE, and yet there are distinct similarities

between the motivations then and political motivations now. Forms change, but people are still people, and God's concerns are still relevant today.

The point being the wealthy people wanted a king. For protection, yes, but also for their own benefit. And Samuel was too blinded by his own hurt feelings to recognize the good and bad motivations for their request and try to lead them to a better solution. That's the other tension in this story. The elders came to Samuel and were like, your sons are no good, give us a king, and Samuel's feelings got hurt, because it felt like a rejection of him. He too wasn't in the right headspace to lead God's people through this crisis.

Enter God, as God always does. After the elders approached Samuel with their request, Samuel prayed to God with a tone that, per one of the commentaries I read, sounds like Samuel "reporting on the people's disloyalty." Tattling on the Israelites, essentially, "God, do you know what these people of yours asked me to do! They want to betray you and get a king; can you believe these people!" The text doesn't say it, but Samuel may have been hoping for a bit of old school smiting on the part of God here. But God is God, so God didn't take Samuel's bait. Instead, God responded first by soothing Samuel's hurt feelings, Samuel, this was never about you. Verse seven, "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." And, God went on to say, this was not the first time. Remember the golden calf? The endless grumping over food? The driving Moses, and then Joshua, and then an assortment of judges, crazy with their endless complaining? Samuel, you are not the first leader of these people to hint that some smiting might be in order. "Listen to their voice," God told

Samuel. And here I should add that the word translated as “listen” in the Hebrew has the sense of obey, do what they’re asking. “Listen to their voice,” give them a king, “only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

That sentence there, God’s command to Samuel to “solemnly warn them” feels huge to me, because it sounds like God spelling out to Samuel what his new position is to be in this new form of government. Samuel will no longer be a judge, instead he is to become a prophet. A prophet, remember, is someone who speaks God’s truth to those in power even when, especially when, that truth is unpopular. And prophets will play a huge role in the life of Israel going forward. For all of their ups and downs with kings, and there will be some ups, and a lot of downs, there will always be a prophet coming along beside, speaking God’s truth, unpopular as it may be, into that king’s ear, trying to turn the kingdom back into living out the covenant which God continues to uphold.

I think this passage gives us two truths about God. First, it gives us God’s commitment to letting us have free will. Because on first read of this passage, the obvious question is, why in the world would God let them have a king? A king is clearly a terrible idea, nothing good is going to come of this, why would God let them make such a supremely poor and short-sighted choice? The reason is because God didn’t create us as puppets, bending to God’s every will. God made us, to quote Psalm eight, a little lower than the angels, with all the freedom both to grow and to fail which that includes. God could have made us drones, following God’s every move and command, worshiping God with no option or even thought to do otherwise. But that kind of servitude isn’t relationship, it’s programming. My robot

vacuum doesn't vacuum because it likes me and wants to make my load easier. It vacuums because it's a robot and it has to do what I tell it to. God did not create us as God-worshipping robots, God created us for relationship. And relationship means the freedom to break that relationship at times. God knew that when we were created, and that risk was worth it to God because it was real, genuine relationship God wanted for us, not bots to praise God blindly.

So there's that promise in this passage. So committed is God to being in relationship with us that God is willing to let us make truly short-sighted and bad decisions rather than force us into a mold. But in God's words to Samuel, we also see something else true, and even more important, about how God understands and moves through this relationship with us. We see a God who is willing to let us make mistakes and who will not walk away from us in those mistakes. Even Samuel can't yet see that. For the record, I think verse eighteen, where Samuel told the people about how they would "cry out because of [their] king, whom [they had] chosen; but the Lord will not answer [them]." I think that's Samuel speaking from his own hurt feelings and not God's actual intention, because that's simply not how the entire rest of the Bible plays out. The people will cry out *all the time* about the injustices of various kings and rulers, and not once does God hear them and not respond. The rest of the Old Testament is a series of prophets speaking God's truths, trying to keep the people in God's covenantal relationship. And what is the New Testament, who is Jesus, but God's ultimate answer, showing up, Word made flesh, to permanently build that relationship so that nothing can keep us from God's love.

Dear people of God, the story of Israel's experiment with monarchy is the promise of God's commitment to be with us wherever we go and whatever we try. Some things we try will be great successes, some, not so much. We can increase the successes and moderate the mistakes by listening to the prophets among us, but for various reasons we won't always make the right decisions. What God guarantees however, is that God always holds up God's end of the covenant. God is with us in whatever we try, and God is willing to try new things with us. To give us space to explore and attempt, learn and grow and fail, and to walk alongside us in our every effort. Because God is committed to the project of relationship with us. Thanks be to God who loves us so fully. Amen.