

Power, Authority, and Choosing a Leader

1 Samuel 8:4-20, (selected verses), 19-20

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4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, 7 and the Lord said to Samuel, "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. 8 Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

I remember seeing a Peanuts cartoon. Lucy says to Linus, "Do this!" "Do this!" "Do this!" In the last panel, Linus replies, "You're right. You would make a good queen." When you're a kid, the possibility of power and unlimited respect seems like a wonderful thing. But when you see what the job entails, you have to give up your childish ways. Or at least, we hope so.

What kind of leaders do we want in our civic life? How does our spirituality inform our lives as citizens? And what images or perceptions do we use for the Holy One? What kind of power?

There are passages in the New Testament when people wanted to make Jesus a king. The reasoning went something like this, I believe: Jesus is a miracle worker, and if we make him the king, he will be our miracle worker. We will have whatever we want. Grace will be gushing out of a faucet. We won't have to worry about looking for bread. We won't have to prepare our own supper. He will just give it to us, if we seize him and declare him our king.

Because if he's the king, he can handle everything. That's what kings do, right? Not only do they have the power, they have the authority. They speak the order, they sign the paper, they take charge. They get things done. The people around Jesus knew that. They were Jews, they had the story in their scripture. (1)

In our passage from the book of I Samuel we find today's story. Weary of priests and prophets, unhappy with God's answers, the people of Israel are casting about for alternatives. They look across the border at neighboring nations and long for the majesty of monarchy, the reliability

of royalty, the certainty of succession. “We want a king!” they announce to Samuel. “Like everyone else!” They imagine a king is the cure for all that ails them.

Poor Samuel. His wayward sons have ruined their reputations and his. Any authority or respect he might once have enjoyed has been robbed by his inability to manage his own house. In fact, decades of failed leadership have ruined any respect the people might once have had for God’s prophets.

Samuel turns to God for a second opinion. God shrugs and says, “I’m rather tired of them. They are tired of me—and of you. Let them have their king. But read them the fine print first.”

The warnings are dire. The dangers are real. ...runs for nine chilling verses.

Their sons will be forced to run ahead of the army, cannon fodder for enemy infantries. Their daughters will be confined to kitchens to cook and perfumeries to delight the queen. Their land will be confiscated, their crops commandeered. Their livestock and servants will be poached. In sum, Samuel warns, “You will be slaves.” And, in the fine print: “If you give yourselves over to a king, God’s ears will be closed to you.”

But the allure of better life under a king remained irresistible. Samuel reads them the fine print, but they refuse to believe it. Instead they roar their wishes: *We want to be like other nations! We want a king to fight our fights!* They get their way. And for four centuries, Israel is governed by kings who, with few exceptions, rule them into ruin.

When the people decide for a monarch to rule over them, God’s immediate rule of the people of Israel is at stake. The people have “forsaken” God and have forgotten how they owe their history to God’s bold, immediate leadership, of leading them out of slavery. Any rule of a king will fall short and reveal itself over time as ungodly, marked by blatant power misuse and exploitation.

In God’s eyes, a king’s unbridled, brutal rule would amount to Israel changing her identity and selling her freedom short: from a dynamic & unique servanthood directly under the leadership and covenant with Yahweh, to the servanthood of a despotic human ruler. Yet they wish for a dynasty, a succession as a seemingly more stable, reliable alternative instead of trusting in a spiritual leader like Samuel or his sons. While the prophet accepts Israel’s choice, Samuel knows that the monarchy is born out of rejection of their God. Seen through Samuel’s lens as prophet, he reluctantly anoints Saul. The drama will soon be played out.

As the biblical stories of Israel unfold, they didn’t have even one perfect king. Oh, they thought the next one would be the right one, but they were wrong. Yet they never gave up hope, even after the nation was repeatedly invaded, even after the office of “king” was eliminated. “The next king is going to be good. He’s going to handle everything for us.”

Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, reminds us that a big thick book in the Bible is called "Kings." The history was so thick that they had to put in two large scrolls, later called "First Kings" and "Second Kings." Brueggemann says the real title of those scrolls ought to conclude with a question mark: "Kings? You call these kings?" (2)

So maybe we should give up the notion that, if only we put the right person on the throne or even in the White House, they will give us what we want. Our earthly rulers can't ever live up to those expectations. They need our prayers and our engagement as citizens so that they might govern wisely. We pray they will work for the common good. We pray they will have a deep spiritual well from which to draw. We pray they will have a moral compass to guide them in complex issues.

Like many of you, I read many articles about the state of our democracy. As citizens, we should be very concerned. This is not a partisan issue to me. There are democrats, republicans, and independents in my extended family and our congregation. I believe we need a robust democracy of various political parties where leaders engage in civil debate on issues and legislation. What would be the best ways for leaders of our democracy to operate?

I close with a quote from Parker Palmer, professor of education, Quaker, activist & author of *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*.

"Many educated Americans who rise to positions of responsibility believe they must operate almost exclusively on the basis of what can be observed and measured because they are educated in a system that mistakenly defines reality that way. And yet, everything human is driven by the invisible powers of the heart."

"The human heart is the first home of democracy." —Terry Tempest Williams
When the heart is supple, it can be "broken open" into a greater capacity to hold our own and the world's pain: it happens every day. When we hold our suffering in a way that opens us to greater compassion, heartbreak becomes a source of healing, deepening our empathy for others who suffer and extending our ability to reach out to them."

May our hearts be open, full of compassion and committed to creating the Beloved Community one small step at a time. Instead of longing for a king, may we deepen our connection to the Divine Mystery who invites all of us to the table in the kin-dom and then sends us out to work together guided by a vision of shalom. Amen.

1) Rev. Bill Carter, "Christ the King," 11.20.16

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2016/11/the-job-that-jesus-refused.html>

2) Walter Brueggemann, *Knox Preaching Guide*, 1 and 2 Samuel