

Give the People What They Want
A Sermon on 1 Samuel 8:1-22
Proper 5
June 10, 2018

Introduction

We are entering a new stage in the history of Israel. We are moving from the age of judges to the age of kings.

It is also a new stage in Israel's relationship with God. Judges were appointed by Yahweh. Their primary responsibility was to settle disputes by interpreting the law. The judges had ruled since the time when Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land.

Kings are hereditary. Yahweh appointed Saul and David, the first two kings, but after that the crown passed to the sons of the king.

The primary responsibility of the kings is to be a warrior, to protect the people and their lands from attacks by foreign enemies.

Some would say the transition is inevitable. The Hebrew people are growing in number and becoming more prosperous. They are experiencing the transition from a tribe to a state.

Today's text shows how Israel's relationship with God has evolved. The author has mixed feelings about the transition.

First Move: The Last of the Judges

Let's catch up on what has happened since Mary's text last week, 1 Samuel 3, when the young Samuel first heard the word of the Lord.

1 Samuel 3 began ominously: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." Eli is an old man and his sons are corrupt. So there is an internal crisis in leadership.

There also is an external crisis. The Philistines have emerged as a threat on their western border. This is the first time that we hear of the Philistines. They are part of the Sea People who emigrated to the southern coast of Palestine. They are known as great warriors. They are technologically advanced. They have mastered iron works and have fashioned armor and shields and swords.

How do the people respond to crisis? Do they turn to God? All of Israel knows that Samuel is a trustworthy prophet of Yahweh. Do they turn to Samuel to ask him to intercede with Yahweh on their behalf?

No, they carry the ark of the covenant into battle before them. The ark was carried in front of the people in the wilderness and the people carried around it around the walls of Jericho. They believe that they can summon the power of Yahweh through the ark.

They are wrong. It is idolatry to attribute the power of Yahweh to the ark. The power of Yahweh can be summoned only by interceding in prayer.

The Philistines rout the Israelites and capture the ark. Eli's two sons are killed in battle. Eli is now 98 years old. He is heavy and nearly blind. When Eli hears the news, he falls backward off his seat, breaks his neck and dies.

Yahweh shows that he cannot be trifled with. The Philistines take the ark and place it in a temple next to a statute of their god Dagon. When they return the next morning, they find the statue of Dagon has fallen with his face to the ground in front of the ark. The Philistines pick up the statute and put it upright. When they return the next morning, the statute has fallen again to the ground in front of the ark, and the head of the statute and both his hands are cut off. Yahweh sends a plague of hemorrhoids on all the people of the city.

The Philistines send the ark to the other major cities in their land, and again all the people are struck with hemorrhoids. Terrified, the Philistines return the ark to Israel. Israel rejoices when the ark is returned, but 70 people are killed when they try to look inside the ark.

That is where today's alternate reading, 1 Samuel 7, begins. Samuel helps the people return to Yahweh. Two things have to happen: the people have to put away their foreign gods and Samuel has to intercede to Yahweh on their behalf. Samuel begins serving as their judge.

The people repent. They put away their gods and serve Yahweh only. They fast and confess that they have sinned against Yahweh.

The Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered and they began advancing into Israel to attack them.

This time the people do the right thing. They ask Samuel to cry out to Yahweh on their behalf. Samuel offers a lamb as a burnt offering. Samuel cries out to the Lord and the Lord answers him.

Then we have an example of holy war. When the Philistines draw near to attack, Yahweh thunders with a mighty voice and sends the Philistines into panic. The armies of Israel pursue the Philistines and strike them down.

One of the oldest images of Yahweh in the Old Testament is as a divine warrior. In a holy war, it is Yahweh that does all the fighting, through acts of nature, like thunder and darkness and hail.

Israel enjoys a period of peace and prosperity under the judgeship of Samuel. Samuel travels a circuit of towns in southern Israel, judging disputes about the Torah. His chief responsibility as a judge is to administer justice according to God's law.

Second Move: The People Want a King

The next crisis comes in today's text when Samuel grows old. His sons do not follow in his ways; they pervert justice and use their position to enrich themselves.

All the elders of Israel come to Samuel and ask, "Appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations." What set Israel apart from other nations was its unique relationship with God. Israel had always trusted in God instead of trusting in a king for security. Israel's identity is at stake.

Their request was evil in the eyes of Samuel, and he prayed to Yahweh. The response of Yahweh is surprising. Yahweh says, "Hearken to the voice of the people, for it is not you they have rejected, rather, it is me they have rejected from being king over them."

This is a new stage in the history of Israel; it is moving from loosely-organized tribes to a centralized monarchy. The covenant faith of ancient Israel arose in response to oppression and marginalization. Israel turned to Yahweh for protection because it had no hope of military victory. It was too small and technologically backward compared to the great powers that surrounded it. As the population grew and as lands became consolidated and began generating an agricultural surplus, the large landowners felt the need to move from tribes with local rule to a centralized organization for administration and military power. The elders of Israel wanted to protect the emerging vested interests.

Yahweh tells Samuel a second time to hearken to the voice of the people and also to warn them of what the justice of the king will be like. Samuel delivers an indictment against kings: six times he says that the king will take. He will take away your sons and put them in his chariots to fight his wars and to plow and harvest his fields and to make his weapons. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take your fields, your olive groves and your vineyards, the best ones, and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your grain and your vineyards and give it to his armies and to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your flocks. Most appalling of all, you shall be his slaves. Yahweh liberated your ancestors from slavery in Egypt, but you shall surrender your freedom to a king.

Samuel tells the people that they will cry out because of their king, but Yahweh will not answer them. They brought it on themselves.

God twice advises Samuel to hearken to the voice of the people, but the people refuse to listen to the voice of Samuel. They say, “No, give us a king so that we may be like other nations.” The people want to place their trust in a great and powerful man instead of in God. People saw God as distant and were beginning to see God as working through great people.

This is the beginning of the hopes for a Messiah. People see a king as embodying the power of God. A king was the most powerful person in their world. They wanted to have a king of their own.

It is part of an emerging sense of self. People in the ancient Biblical period saw themselves as subject to the control of outside forces, gods and angels and demons. Their only hope is to appease God. As they begin to develop a sense of self, they see themselves as partly in control of their own destiny.

Part of the problem with a sense of self is that self interest and self glorification come with it.

Yahweh understands this, but Yahweh is willing to risk giving the people what they want, even against if it is against God’s plan for Israel. God authorizes the establishment of kingship in Israel and designates Saul as the first king. God begins working through prophets to remind the king of God’s justice when they commit violations of the covenant.

The people of Israel struggle to exceed divinely appointed boundaries. In seeking a new status that they regard as more glorious, they repudiate their only true glory, the covenant relationship that sets Israel apart from other nations.

Kyle McCarter, an Old Testament scholar, compares today’s text to the Garden of Eden. Both are stories about coming of age, of an emerging sense of self. Samuel warns them that, just like in Eden, life after the rebellion against God will be a struggle. The people don’t want to hear it.

Third Move: Balancing God and Self

We continue to resist any limits on our autonomy today. We all live like kings compared to the generations that came before us. We rely on machines and technology. We want to overcome the limits that nature imposes on us.

Chapter 8 offers no clear-cut, right-or-wrong way to resolve the crisis. God is willing to let us try to find ourselves by trusting in kings for security instead of trusting in God.

Samuel’s warning about kings certainly proved to be right. He fairly describes most of the kings in Israel’s history. And many of the kings, emperors and dictators

in world history. Their political power corrupts them. They can't resist the temptation to take for themselves.

We try to put limits on political leaders by evolving into republican democracies and parliamentary democracies. Corruption and self-aggrandizement is very much still a problem.

It is not too late, it is never too late, to turn back to God. We can seek to balance our selfhood and our faith in God. We can embrace trust instead of fear. We can trust that things will work out if we center our lives on God.

The elders of Israel are grasping for security. Samuel tells them that what they need is justice. Another word for justice is righteousness. It means right relationship with God and right relationship with all people and all parts of creation. If your focus is on right relationship, that is a powerful check on self.

Our good friend, Wendell Berry, cautions us to respect the limits that nature sets. Know your place.

Being in right relationship with other people is community. Being in right relationship with the land and all the creatures on it is stewardship and sustainability. It is not a diminishment of self. It is putting self in proper relationship. That allows the self to flourish. It allows other people and other parts of creation to flourish.

We mean well, but we struggle to center our lives on God. The rest of our lives intrude on us. Our time and energy is consumed by our families, our jobs, our commitments. When we do have time for ourselves, we are consumed by entertaining and stimulating ourselves.

God is not separate from us, God is part of the rest of our lives, if only we will look for God in whatever we do.

Imagine that we are entering into a new stage of history: a spiritual revolution. We have been living in an industrial revolution for the past 250 years, and it has just about played itself out. Its limits are starkly apparent. Self interest is glorified. Our culture places higher value on capital and machines than on community. Creation is groaning, longing for its redemption.

Conclusion

We don't need to look to a king or a president to be our Messiah. We already have one. And our Messiah is not a warrior. He is a Prince of Peace. He leads us to a higher righteousness. He leads us to a kingdom where God's ways are recognized and embraced. He leads us to a kingdom where all people are children of God and all parts of creation are sacred. It is a kingdom in which everyone prays, not just judges

and prophets. God hears our prayers and transforms us. It is a kingdom for which we pray without ceasing.

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