

“A Rejected King”
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1 Samuel 8:4-9; Acts 1:1-4;
Luke 4:16-21, 42-44

As we read the scripture from Samuel this morning, I am reminded what it must have been like for Samuel. It feels like Samuel must have been in an all-church meeting, and in that meeting they were saying, basically, “You don’t have a way of continuing to give us leadership. Your sons aren’t going to work, so we want a king like everyone else. We want a different leader.” If we take what comes later, we must notice a little of what Samuel must have been feeling. He must have been feeling like these people who he had spent all this time with, who he had been priest for, were rejecting him. They were saying, “We don’t believe in you.”

I can just imagine him having that feeling in the pit of his stomach and his struggle with that, and so he turns as best as he can to God in prayer. And God is comforting in a way. He says, “Samuel, don’t worry about this. They’re not rejecting you, they are rejecting me.” I’m not sure how comforting that really is in some ways, but all of a sudden we can transfer that experience that Samuel is having to God. But God says, “Listen to the people.” That’s an incredible kind of statement to me. God says to listen to the people, let them decide. I think that God as a king would come with his armies and say, “No way you’re going to do that to me.” No, he says, “Listen to the people. Let them make their decision, but give them a warning. Do not for them that if they do this, they will be dealing with the way of human kings. Let them think about that.”

And it is something to think about. Mark Twain wrote a book called *The Prince and the Pauper*. It is, in a way, an entry into thinking about the nature of human kings, the way of human kings. If you know the story, the prince meets this pauper that looks exactly like him. He thinks, “This will be wonderful. Let’s trade places for a bit.” It’s about the very incredible difference of experience the two people have. When we have the way of human kings, the suggestion is that we’re going to have princes and we’re going to have paupers. We’re going to have that division of people so a few get to enjoy the wonders of life and the opulence, but there will be a lot of suffering for the rest. And that’s often our sense of kings. God’s saying that is the way of human kings.

If we continue on, we recognize that after these Israelites decide to go ahead and do things like everybody else does, they say, “Samuel, what’s going to happen? How are we going to organize ourselves if you’re not here? We have to have a king. We have to do it like everybody else does.” Well, what we get is a whole series of kings with prophets telling them to straighten up. This is the way I was thinking about it: You have somebody who knows the way, who can drive the car, and says, “You can come with me.” But they say, “No we don’t know you in the way we like. You don’t quite fit our image of a driver of the car. You’re not like all the other drivers of all the other cars that we see out there. So we’re going to get our own driver, thank you.” They get a driver and immediately they start going off the road because the driver doesn’t know where

he's going and he doesn't know how to drive. He doesn't see the whole picture. So we have the prophets who keep coming back and saying, "You're going off the road!"

What do they mean when they say you're going off the road? I can boil it down into two things. One, you are being idolatrous; you're not really paying attention to God, and two, you're not really paying attention to people. If you look at most of the Old Testament after that, it feels like it's about how the people are not paying attention to God, they are getting into idolatry, or there is a lack of justice, bribes, influence of gifts, theft, misuse of the vulnerable and weak. That's in Isaiah. If you look at Hosea (4:1-2, 6), it says there is no faithfulness or loyalty, no knowledge of God in the land, swearing, lying, murder. Over and over again this is the message. It goes on to talk about stealing and adultery. Bloodshed follows bloodshed. There is violence. Another place it says, "My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge because they have rejected knowledge." And we always hear what God hopes for, too. "I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice." (Hosea 6:6)

It's about the nature of power. Sacrifice is about trying to convince God to do what we want God to do. Listening to God is recognizing God's power, the real power that shapes the future that is good. It's about the knowledge of God rather than use burnt offerings to try to manipulate God.

Amos is pretty much the same. If we had the time, we could step through all the minor prophets and then go to the major prophets, and the themes are there. Over and over again they say things like we find in Amos 5:12-15: "How great are your sins. You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, push aside the needy at the place of justice at the gate. The prudent will keep silent... Seek good and not evil that you may live... Establish justice in the gate." Over and over again, this is the message that God brings to the people of Israel as they have their own king.

As Jesus comes, what is he announcing? One way to say it is that he's proclaiming release. He's bringing good news to the poor. He's announcing something great that's coming. That first part of Luke we read was about Jesus repeating what Isaiah had said, and saying, "Now it is occurring." Then he goes on at the very end of that chapter when we begin to see some of that happening, and says, "I must go on and proclaim the kingdom of God." What is happening?

I think he's basically saying, "You tried the king. It didn't work. You need something new. You need to return and know that God has always been king. God has always been the one who governed, the one whose power has always been true."

You see, it's a struggle between how we understand how we govern our lives with the power we think is in our lives. So what's the power in our lives? Is it the economic system? Is that what shapes our future into what we want it to be? Is it a particular way of thinking? Is it our identity as a United States citizen? What is it that is the power that shapes who we are and that we think is going to shape the future of our world? Because what we think shapes that future is how we live. It governs us.

We have trouble thinking about a king because I always think we're going to see this guy up on a throne. That's not the kind of king we're talking about. It's much more than that. It's the actual thing that governs our lives, that leads us to make our decisions, the way we understand the world we live in. And Jesus is saying, "Look what is happening now and who I am."

Good news to the poor. Release to the captive. Sight to the blind. The oppressed go free and it's the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's favor harkens back to the Jubilee Year when debts are forgiven because we can become enslaved in debt. What Jesus is bringing us is the kingdom of God and inviting us to recognize its presence—present in who he is, and what he is bringing us.

We might get a clue about the nature of the kingdom of God when we recognize that there's this guy walking around from city to city quietly doing this teaching rather than trumpets heralding an announcement. There's no trumpet fanfare. Something is different about this kind of kingdom that comes as an invitation.

We think back on a God that said, "Listen to the people. Let them choose." Isn't that what Jesus is doing? He's letting us choose. That's one of the most fascinating things to me. It's an invitation to recognize that how we choose has consequences. There are consequences if we choose to recognize that:

- God is king
- God is the one that can govern our lives
- God can show us the way
- God can lead us into a future that we want to live in
- God is the one who will give us good, abundant life
- God is the authority
- God helps us deal with what wealth is, what welfare of human beings is

Jesus is telling us again that God is king and we need to choose to acknowledge that and to recognize the wonder and live into the future that brings, or not.

Sometimes we get so focused on the idea that Jesus is simply changing us enough that we can get to heaven. N. T. Wright suggested that because we're kind of creedal, we'll take something like the Apostles Creed, where it says "He was born of the Virgin Mary, and then suffered under Pontius Pilate and died." N. T. Wright asks, "Was there anything in between? He was born and then died?" He says, "Do you think Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John might say, 'What about us? Did we write these Gospels for any reason?' " Because when Jesus taught us to pray, he didn't teach us to pray, "Let us be good enough to get into heaven." He said, "Let your kingdom come, your will be done on *earth* as it *is* in heaven." Amen.