

**June 9, 2024**

**1 Samuel 8:4-22, 11:14-15**

**Sermon Title: Called to Be Different**

*4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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."*

*<sup>10</sup> So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup> He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, <sup>12</sup> and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup> He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. <sup>14</sup> He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. <sup>15</sup> He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. <sup>16</sup> He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup> He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. <sup>18</sup> And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day."*

*<sup>19</sup> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! We are determined to have a king over us, <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> When Samuel heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. <sup>22</sup> The Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them." Samuel then said to the Israelites, "Each of you return home."*

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

So, you want a king...

This is the reason the tribal elders have gathered to make their case to Samuel and Samuel is not pleased.

So, you want a king...

Israel didn't have a king. At this point in its history, it has judges and is organized by tribes. It is the system God established as the people began to settle in the land of milk and honey, after their liberation from slavery and 40-year jaunt through the wilderness. There is no centralized power. Each tribe and its judges deal with enemy attacks and internal affairs. While there were a few judges that remained faithful to God, many were corrupt and unfaithful.

But not Samuel. Samuel was different. He grew up in the temple. He heard God's voice. Samuel was a righteous judge, priest, and prophet. He helped to unify the tribes and judges. He traveled to be with the people. He was just and faithful to God. He was respected.

But he wasn't immortal. He didn't even have the power to keep his own sons from corruption and selling out...and this is what concerned the elders. With the Philistines invading their borders with their iron weapons and implements, the elders recognized the vulnerability of Israel to outside threats and internal collapse. Their proposed solution was a centralized system of governance and a unified military.

So, you want a king...

And really, who could blame them? No one enjoys chaos and that is what it felt like to elders. And the one person that seemed to be holding it all together, Samuel, was old, and his rotten sons only amplified their concern. So here they are, standing before Samuel.

So, you want a king...

Samuel prays and God speaks to Samuel. "It's not you," says God, "It's me." "It's me they are rejecting, just like they have since I brought them out of Egypt. They have rejected me as their king. Give them what they want, but first, tell them what they can expect with a human king. Samuel returns to the elders.

So, you want a king...

You need to know that he will take and take and take. He will take your sons. He will take your daughters. He will take your servants. He will take one tenth of what you grow, the best tenth. He will take the best of your cattle and donkeys. He will take a tenth of your flock. He will take and take to build a military that assuages your fears. Then he'll take more to produce luxury goods for himself and his court. He'll take your labor. He will take your freedom and enslave you. Just so you know.

You might have noticed that Samuel doesn't have a very high opinion of kings. They almost always end up acting like some version of Pharaoh. They almost always end up creating some kind of empire that serves only those at the top and enslaves those at the bottom.

So, you want a king...

We know Samuel doesn't like kings, but what about God? It seems like God is willing to work with it, except God does say that God will not hear them when they start complaining about their king.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read that as the people enter the promised land they might have a king; one that God chooses. This king behaves nothing like the king Samuel describes. He is not a taker. It says in Deuteronomy 17:16-20, "<sup>16</sup> He must not acquire many horses for himself...and he must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. <sup>18</sup> When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> It shall remain with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, <sup>20</sup> neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

That kind of king wouldn't be so bad, if he existed.

But that wasn't the kind of king the elders wanted. They wanted a king to fight their battles. They wanted a king that would make them like the other nations. That's the part that made Samuel mad. They aren't supposed to be like other nations. God chose this people to be a blessing to all nations, not the conqueror of all nations. God gave them the Sabbath, a day of rest, as a reminder of their freedom from slavery. God gave them the ten commandments so they could live together without the greed, corruption, and

violence of other nations. God commanded them to love their neighbors. God wanted them to be a blessing.

So, you want a king...

Okay, have your king.

The astonishing thing is that God is willing to work with the people. As history unfolds the kingdom splits into Judah and Israel and there are 39 kings. Only six of those kings were said to walk in the ways of God before both nations fall to greater empires. And still, God does not give up on God's people. A faithful remnant remains.

And then a star appears. Magi from the east go to the King of the Jews, the mighty Herod, and ask where the new king of the Jews might be so they can see him and offer their gifts. And so begins the New Testament and the story of Jesus, who inaugurates the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Only we learn really fast that Jesus isn't talking about earthly kings and a system of government. Jesus proclaims a kingdom that stands in stark contrast to the kingdoms of this world. The message of the Kingdom is an invitation to be different...to be a blessing...by walking in God's ways even as earthly rulers rage and earthly kingdoms clash.

So, you want a king...

The question is, which king will we choose?

To whom will we pledge our allegiance? To whom will we turn when the Philistines are at the border and corruption, greed, and self-interest rule the roost.

Will we choose Jesus, the crucified king? Will we choose the way of love, compassion, service, forgiveness...

Or will we put our faith in an earthly king with power and control – to appease our fears - to make us or break us?

All this talk of kings and kingdoms may seem completely irrelevant...until you turn on the news or read the paper and you see the choices people are making for authoritarianism, for violence, for domination, for nationalism, claiming it is God's will. It appears that some people are still clamoring for a king.

May we know better the ways and will of God.

May God be our refuge and strength.

