

First Presbyterian Church
1 Sam 8:4-11, Romans 12:2, “Give Us A King to Lead Us”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/9/2024

You might know that one of my hobbies is watercolor painting.
But every time I paint – indoors or outdoors – I have to lug out my
back pack, set up my tripod easel, sort out my paints,
organize my paper, get my brushes where I want them...
And then when I’m done, I have to pack it all back up again.
Why? We just don’t have room for dedicated studio space.
If I could just have a house with space for a painting studio,
(and maybe a woodworking shop to make my own frames)
I’d be set.

When I go to other artists’ houses and see their spacious studios
(or even cramped studios!), I get a little jealous.

What is the one thing you see someone else has that makes you think,
“If I could get that, I’d have it made.”
A healthy retirement account?
Recognition for all the hard work you’ve put in?
How about feeling secure about your health?
Feeling secure from crime or economic uncertainty
or climate change disasters?

Wow...If I could live in a world where those things were under control,
I would have it made.
What is it for you?

Just about 3,000 years ago, God’s chosen people, the Israelites,
said the one thing that would really make them feel complete
was to have a king to lead them.

Last week in 1 Sam. 3, we were introduced to Eli the prophet,
and Samuel, who God selected to be Eli’s successor.

But in chapters 4 to 7, Eli entrusted leadership to his sons
who are wicked and lead the country into ruin.
Eli & sons die on the same day,
Samuel’s leadership is raised up.

The Ark of God (with the 10 Commandments inside) is stolen
and becomes a hot-potato in a comedic section
where it gets passed from city to city because
wherever it lands the people get headaches and tumors
and sores and people start dying all over the place
because the hand of the Lord is heavy against them.
So they say, “Get this thing out of our city!”

Eventually, the Ark is returned to Israel (not without complication),
and then all the people of Israel turn back to the Lord
under Samuel’s leadership.

(Okay ... so when did they say they wanted a king?
Well, that’s coming next.)

Samuel leads Israel for a good long lifetime,
but then Chapter 8 begins with the line,
“When Samuel grew old,
he appointed his sons as Israel’s leaders.”

This again? Do you remember when Eli tried to pass things on to his sons?
Well this round didn’t turn out any better.
Samuel’s sons did not follow their father’s ways,
they were dishonest, and perverted justice,
and *as a result of this*, the people say to Samuel,
**“You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways;
now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”**

The people are rejecting Samuel’s leadership
because Samuel failed to learn from Eli’s mistakes.

What would God have done if Samuel did not give power to his sons?
Would another prophet be raised up?
What if Samuel had raised better boys or even girls to lead Israel?
We don’t know.

All we know is that the people have rejected Samuel in his old age,
and his sons in their wickedness and the people say,
“Appoint a king to lead us *such as all the other nations have.*”

They want to be like all the other nations ...
which is a tragic irony because their calling
is *not* to be like other nations.
Their calling is to be the unique, set apart people of God
who bring blessing to all families on earth.

Imagine you tell a child,
“Guess what? I choose you for a special party!
At the party I will give you cold watermelon,
and grilled chicken, raised right here in McMinnville.
I’ll pick fresh vegetables from the garden for a salad
and we’ll have Willamette Valley peaches and cream for dessert.
Not only that, but you’ll have so much at the party
that you can share with all your friends
and invite them over for dinner.”

And the child says,
“But I want McDonalds and a slushy like all the other kids have.”

Israel told Samuel they wanted to exchange the glorious bounty
of life with God for the purely ordinary and predictable life
of having a king.

Samuel didn’t like it. So Samuel prayed and the Lord told him,
**“Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they
have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they
have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this
day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to
you.”**

Ah, did you hear that? In truth, Israel has never been without a king!
They have always had the best king they could possibly have –
their loving Creator who rules all things with humility,
patience, love, and grace, and has a wonderful plan
for their future.

The problem is that Israel wants a king *like everybody else has*.

Even Christians today want life like everybody else has it.
Isn’t it true? We want to live like the world around us,
even though it’s obvious that the world’s way of life
is plunging everybody into self-destruction.

Doesn't matter. That's what we want.

Notice is just how patient God is.

God doesn't blame Samuel, though there are reasons to do so.

God doesn't forsake the people, though it's hard to see why not.

Our Creator is shown to be patient, adaptable, flexible, and resilient.

The people may choose what they will choose

and God will continue relating to them

within this new framework of an earthly king

even though it implicitly rejects the Lord

as the only king they need.

Our God is not afraid of ambiguity, not afraid of tension,

not afraid of paradox, not afraid of sinful people who make mistakes.

And yet we live our lives seeking to clear out

any trace of ambiguity and uncertainty. We want to know:

Who is right, who is wrong on the internet?

Is Caitlin Clark being treated fairly or unfairly?

Is OpenAI an ethical or unethical company?

Is it better to recycle plastic or throw it away?

Every topic becomes a controversy because we want to know

exactly the right thing to think and to do.

But God seems to be okay with people who don't know the right thing
to think or to do.

Could it be that God is more okay with our present condition than we are?

Could God's grace for our weak faith and shaky morality

be much more abundant than we usually think it is? [PAUSE]

Just like Samuel and Israel,

we have to accept the fact that we need to live our lives

in utter dependence upon God's grace.

We have to learn to accept the fact that God knows

we make real mistakes, and God is big enough

to deal with it, love us anyway,

and call us forward.

As Samuel called the people forward, he did so reluctantly.

He was not as sure as God is that it was a good idea to give Israel this much freedom and grace.

Getting the king they so desired would come with consequences. 1 S. 8:10ff

- He will take your sons for his army, for his department of agriculture, for his department of “defense.”
- He will take your daughters to attend to him, to cook and bake. And he’ll take your fields, tax your grain, and take your best cattle and donkeys.
- Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use.
- He will take a tenth of your flocks and *you yourselves* will become his slaves.
- When this happens and you cry out the Lord will not answer you on that day.
- And after all this the people said again, **“No! We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”**

In the end, God agreed with Samuel that the people were better off without a king.

God agreed with Samuel’s description of all the things this king would do. And yet God not only allowed them to have a king – but also *helped* them get a king.

God chose a king named Saul with all the attributes the people would want – when they bring him out he’s a head taller than all the rest.

In other words, he looked the part, he could lead them in battle.

But even so, all the things Samuel worried about eventually came to pass. Israel and their kings became just like all the other nations.

In Romans 12:2, the Apostle Paul writes,

**“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**

**Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is –
his good, pleasing and perfect will.”**

When we look to the world around us for the standard of success,
or goodness, or security from danger,
we commit ourselves to be conformed
to the pattern of the world.

We say, "I want to have a family with star athletes like my friends have."
"I want to be known as a great figure in the community."
"If only I were strong and fit like those people are."

Or in our secret hearts we think,
"Everyone is talking about my neighbor's updated house or garden ...
I want them to talk about my house that way."
"I want my political party to dominate here the way this other party
controls things over there."

When we indulge these comparative desires *to be like others*,
we are in fact being conformed to the world.

Did you know that without getting *any* of the things we want,
we have access to something much, much better?
We're like the child who is offered a rich, nourishing banquet
but just wants McDonalds and a slurpy.

In Christ we become a new people who seek first the way
of God's heavenly realm. Rather than being conformed to the world,
God invites us to be transformed in the renewing of our minds.

The desire will always be there, and like God,
we should be kind and compassionate with ourselves
when we encounter them. Shame is not the way out.

Instead, we can pray like this... "God...you know what I want.
But instead of giving me that, give me what you know is best.
Please transform my heart to be like the heart of Jesus.
I cannot do that, but you can.
Give me contentment and generosity. Give me love and compassion.
Give me humility and mercy and grace. *Give me more of you,*
for true satisfaction and happiness is found nowhere else."