

¹ When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead ^[a] us, such as all the other nations have."

⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle ^[b] and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. ²⁰ 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."

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Then Samuel said to the men of Israel, "Everyone go back to his town."

-- 1 Sam 8

"Give us a king!" they demanded. "Give us a king so that we can be like all the other nations. Give us a king so that we won't have to stick out like sore thumbs. Give

us a king who will fight for us. Give us a king whom we can point to and say 'this is our king'."

I imagine Samuel paused then, as we pause now to consider Israel's irrational demand. For a nation of former slaves who were only freed by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, for a nation of nomads who every day were given manna to eat, for a nation of warriors who could only take the land because it was the Lord who fought for them, they had now truly lost their way.

Samuel must have wondered, *"Did I not lead them against the Philistines at Mizpah and win? Why does Israel long for a King when they have the Lord? And why do they long for a King to judge them when they have me?"*

We often speak of Samuel in a saintly light, but he makes a devastating error when it comes to his self-perception. As the judge of Israel, he should know that the calling that has been given to him is not a hereditary position. Yet this is precisely what Samuel does: he ignores the hand and voice of God and puts forward his own sons in the hope that they might continue his legacy. For Samuel, continuity was a *good thing*. Even if his sons are nothing like him, they're still his sons and their presence might assuage Israel into believing that even after Samuel is gone, *everything is going to be all right. There will still be control.*

Yet, like the sons of Eli, Samuel's own mentor, the sons are not worthy of the calling given to their father. Continuity of control now becomes uncertainty, something that Israel cannot stand.

“Give us a king,” they shout. “Give us a king who will make everything continue the way it should.”

Samuel, of course, is disappointed. Yet what the text leaves blank for us to consider is whether Samuel is disappointed for the right reasons. The fact that God’s response to Israel’s demand is “they haven’t rejected you, they’ve rejected *me*” seems to suggest that the source of Samuel’s disappointment with Israel was that they rejected him: the son of Hannah and Elkanah, the miracle child, the boy who grew up in the Temple. Israel’s rejection of Samuel’s sons is seen by him as a rejection of his name, his power, his plan for giving Israel a hope and a future.

“No,” God says. “They have not rejected you, you proud old man. They have rejected me. All these years you’ve laboured under the assumption that you were the one with the authority, but remember, the authority is mine to give. Now, tell them. Tell them that what they’re doing is contrary to what it means to be my people.”

The sin of Samuel now inflames the sin of Israel—they don’t want to be God’s people, which is different from enjoying God’s blessing. Being God’s people necessarily means enjoying the blessing of God, but enjoying the blessing of God does not mean being one of God’s people. God is good to all, but being chosen by God means being on a mission for Him. Israel may want God’s help and providence, but when it comes to following the call of God to *be* His people, a light for all the nations, they shirk their reason for being.

When we read the story from Genesis through Exodus to Joshua, Judges, and now in Samuel, we are never meant to believe that Israel has deserved anything they

have gotten to this point. Israel, the nation of nomadic nobodies, has conquered Jericho and Canaan and settled there not because they were particularly strong or cunning, but because it is the Lord who fights for them. This is to be their fundamental witness to all who watch the rise of a non-people into a nation.

Yet they cry, “*Give us a king who will fight for us!*” However, this is not the worst thing they say that day. Worse by far is their insistence on being like the other nations surrounding them.

Samuel warns them against their desire to be like everyone else: with a king and with static continuity from generation to generation. It was never meant to be that way: each generation was to follow the Lord, not rely on its power structures or traditions for survival. After all, this was the name of the nation itself: *Y’is-ra-el*—those that contend with God. Yet such a warning comes too late: Israel gives itself over to idolatry of a different kind. Not to an idol made of silver or gold, not to Dagon or Asherah or Baal, but to the sin that has spoiled all of us since Eden: the idolatry of ourselves.

“*Give us a king,*” they cry. “*Let us put a man where God belongs.*”

Throughout the tale thus far there is the undercurrent of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Kingdom of God. Yes, they were a chosen people, but chosen for the mission of God. Everything about them was to speak of the reality of God’s work in the world, from their just and loving dealings with each other to the way in which they *had no king but God alone*.

Who knows why Israel gives up on God after centuries of evidence that God is still mighty and faithful? Maybe they couldn’t bear that they were called to stand out

from the surrounding cultures, to be a different kind of people who attest to a different kind of God.

What we do know is that in the end, they *couldn't* handle it. Israel wanted a king because they wanted to be like everyone else, to pin their hopes on human structures and hierarchies rather than the living God. Israel shuns a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for tyranny and subjection.

This is the growing edge for many of us who come together as the gathered people of God in Christ. Many of us came here today hoping to socialize and be fed a scrap of religious sausage, and so some of us will leave having had just that. Yet there is a darker side to a mere churchgoing life, one that ignores the reality that we very often will rely on programs and initiatives to get our spiritual fix. We come together on Sundays out of tradition, not with the expectation that we shall meet the living God. We become people who respond to needs instead of responding to God as he calls us out of darkness and into light. And as we lose touch with the voice of God, we become problem-fixers who scheme for steady continuity rather than the mystery of relating with a God who has a will of His own.

If we are truly open to God, He will break into our schemes. He will confound our desire for uninteresting ignorance and gives us restless hearts that yearn for His Kingdom to come, both in our lives and in the life of the world.

What it takes, however, is the willingness to step out from the crowd and be identified with Christ. In the 4th century, Athanasius of Alexandria defied the Emperor over the teaching that Jesus is not the eternal Son of God. Athanasius was persecuted

and exiled five times for his trouble, until the Emperor himself said to him: “*Do you not realize all the world is against you?*” Athanasius replied, “*Then I am against all the world.*”

Many of us have ignored the cost of discipleship. Most of us would rather sit back and cruise our way through the Christian life. Many who come to be with us are habituated to the practice of easy answers and unthinking subservience to cultures—even church cultures—of different kinds. Yet it has been the hope and practice of this church that we encourage you to contend with God honestly, without pretending that life in Christ is easy at all. The reason why we are called a church, then, is because we are to enter into the mystery *together*.

The alternative is to adapt to the surrounding culture so completely that we lose sight of what the Kingdom of God is all about: salt, light, yeast. Make no mistake about it: from a worldly perspective, the message of the cross and the God-man who hung on it is pure foolishness. Yet the cross is the entry point to all *kinds* of Kingdom foolishness—the most foolish and difficult thing being to love God and love one another.

I understand why people think this way, though. Sometimes, it’s easier to live under a tyrannical regime than be free in Christ. You know what you’re going to get when you wake up chained to a culture and its selfish desires. You don’t have to be responsible for listening to the heart of God, you only need follow your bliss and do no harm.

Yet what such an unthinking assumption of worldly values as our own boils down to is laziness. It is laziness to ignore the voice of God in favour of the easy way out. It

is laziness to follow the way of the world just so that you can fit in and “have it all”. No. We are called to stand *out* by virtue of our love for God, for one another and for the world that God loves. We are called to stand *together* as people called by the Spirit to dwell in Christ and live as Kingdom people. And we are called not to sell our obedience to earthly kingdoms that rise and fall, but to the Kingdom of God, that now established, we wait for its fullness.

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.” (Deut. 30:19-20)

1.) How are you most tempted to conform to the way of the world?