

# **“The Way of the King”**

*1 Samuel 8: 1-22*

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What is the quintessential quality of a church leader? We will ordain and install in a few weeks some sterling people as officers, and you are seeking a new pastor. What is needed for leading God’s people, and for that matter, all leadership throughout society? Well, the lectionary this week has given us a gem of a text with which to ponder this question. The story revolves around the prophet Samuel and Israel’s demand that it have a king as its ruler. For about 200 years after the people had entered Canaan they were led by judges – that’s not a judicial term here. Judges were charismatic men and women, chosen by God’s spirit to lead the people.

Samuel was one of those great judges, but alas the great man has a problem. The people do not want his corrupt sons to succeed him. Oh, the people loved Samuel; they remembered him fondly, and if the people had had some better skills in human relations, they should have gone to the old prophet and given him the low-down on his sons.

Instead, as people are wont to do when their world begins to fall apart or even slightly change, they look around for a better option, a new model, something they think is working elsewhere. “Oh, Samuel, we love you, you know. You preach fairly well, and you shepherd us alright, but those two boys of yours aren’t like you and should not succeed you. They just don’t have the touch that you do. You are getting up there in age. We have been thinking: there is this new thing out there we have been looking at that we think could help us: a king! They put on good shows and wear sparkling crowns and armor, and they bring order to chaos. Things are just a little unsettled here. We should have a king like all the other nations. We want to be like everybody else.”

You have to sympathize with them. We all want a king too sometimes. A king is whatever brings order and whatever protects us from whatever we fear. And we fear a lot. We fear trouble in our families. We fear illness. We fear a downturn in the economy. We are uncertain about the future. And so we want a king to bring order out of chaos, a strong arm that can make things right.

Churches sometimes want kings and the technology of kings. As those ancient Israelites did, churches look around, and they see success in other congregations and wish they could have what others have. They think, “Maybe we need better administration, or a superstar in the pulpit, or different worship styles. Why are they so successful? They must have a winning formula!” Churches should have an expectation of excellence, solutions to practical problems too, good practices, and sometimes we can learn from the world of business and secular leadership. But .... But ... there is another ingredient in the church-world. You can’t forget it. But for the moment let’s return to our story.

Can you imagine how upset Samuel was? “But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to govern us.’” God, however, tells him, “Don’t take this so personally, Samuel. It’s not you they are rejecting; it’s me, it’s my kingship they don’t trust. They haven’t changed since the day I brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They still chase after other gods, and now they want what everyone else has. They want one of those glitzy Middle Eastern kings who will take their land and milk them for everything, who will conscript their sons into war, overtax them, and overspend the economy on weapons of war. And when that happens, they will cry out to me, but I am not going to listen to them.”

What the people were rejecting was God-oriented leadership, God who had led them for a long time. Rather than trusting their lives to God and God's care, which Samuel had represented, they were going to have it their way, "not living by faith, but living defensively, cautiously, planning for their own future. King for them [as it does for us] meant managed security, living in conformity with the ways of the world," just like the other nations. (Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, p.56) Israel, however, was never meant to be like the other nations. Israel was called to be set apart, to be a light to the world of God's very different ways, a demonstration to the world of a new way to live.

And what of the church? Are we like every other social group in society? Are we to be different too? What of us, who follow Jesus, who bear the mark of baptism in his name on our brow, are we not to be different too? To be Christ's people? Paul the Apostle said in Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." But ... in the face of our terrors and fears we too want to be like others. We want the king to fight our battles, to solve our problems, but when we follow the way of the king, we pay our price too. More often than not, church life, national politics, relationships, how we treat each other, and the natural world mirrors all other politics and relationships. Shouldn't we be different?

The world beyond our walls – the world that needs the love of God and our evangelism – asks us that question all the time, and we should ask it too. People come here hungry for something different, different from what they experience in work and life. They hunger for the healing love of God and a community that reflects it. Yes, the church is an institution like all other institutions in the world. We pay bills, balance budgets, work with people – we are like others. But we are a divine institution, created by the Holy Spirit, that leads men and women to faith, that turns our hearts to God and God's ways, that calls us to suffer for the sake of others, and to walk the difficult path of forgiveness and reconciliation. Aren't we called to be just a little odd for God, in some way? But we don't trust. And we end up reaping the consequences. God let the Israelites have what they wanted because they had rejected what they needed. And if not getting what you want disappoints you, imagine getting what you want but only receiving an even greater disappointment.

Well, what kind of leaders do we need, if not the strong leadership of kings? Well, God gives us a real king. "You want a king. I'll give you a king. I will come down and live as one of you and show you what kingship, and leadership, really is. Your kings build armies for war, and I say, 'Turn the other cheek.' Your kings gain power for themselves; I give away my life for the poor; I heal the sick, clothe the naked, and welcome all into my family.

We don't need kings. We have the king of kings, Jesus Christ, who shows us the essential ingredient to leadership in the church. Jesus is the embodiment of what it means to be a servant leader. He said to disciples: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant ... For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10) Most of us would think, "No, leaders are bosses who give orders and tell others what to do: they are commanders or the rulers or the big brains. You can see that swagger in presidents of countries and companies, churches and colleges. But the servant leader thinks differently: "I am a fellow human being with these people, and it is my responsibility to love and guide this family or country, to serve and lead this congregation, to stimulate the learning process in the classroom."

Leaders share a common humanity with the people they lead and when they don't recognize that, an artificial distance creeps in between leaders and their people and everybody suffers. Phoniness, posturing, and self-importance emerge and cut off leaders from people.

It does sound like a paradox, this combination of leading and serving, power combined with self-sacrifice, authority and love, but the two aren't opposing truths, but necessary parts of one truth. People are led effectively when leaders care and serve the people and as Jesus said, when they take their place among the people.

I have a favorite president of the United States: Abraham Lincoln. Let me illustrate my point with a true story that illustrates this vivid paradox of servant leadership. During the Civil War Lincoln was visited by a Colonel Scott, one of the commanders of troops guarding Washington. His wife had drowned in a steamboat collision, and Scott was requesting a leave of absence to bury his wife and comfort his children. That request had been denied. His immediate commander had denied it, and the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton had denied it, and so late one night he visited the President of the United States, and Lincoln exploded: "Am I to have no rest? Is there no hour or spot where I may escape these constant calls? Why do you follow me here with such business as this? Get over to the War Office where they are in charge!" He had he told Lincoln.

And Lincoln replied: "Then you ought not go. Mr. Stanton knows the necessities of war and knows what rules are necessary. It would be wrong of me to override his rules and decisions; it might work disaster to important movements. And then you need to know that I have other duties to attend to – heaven knows, enough for one man – and I can give no thought to questions of this kind. Why do you come here to appeal to my humanity? Don't you know that we are in the midst of war? That suffering and death press upon all of us? That works of humanity and affection, which we would cheerfully perform in days of peace are trampled upon and outlawed by war? That there is no room left for them? There is but one duty now – to fight! ... Every family in the land is crushed with sorrow; but they must not each come to me for help. I have all the burdens I can carry. Go to the War Department. Your business belongs there. If they cannot help you, then bear your burden, as we all must, until this war is over. Everything must yield to the paramount duty of finishing this war."

Colonel Scott returned to his barracks, brooding and sorrowful. The next morning there was a knock on at the door. He opened it and there stood the President of the United States. Lincoln took Scott's hands, held them, and said, "My dear Colonel, I was a brute last night. I have no excuse to offer. I was weary to the last extent, but I had no right to treat a man with rudeness who has offered his life to his country, much more a man in great affliction. I have had a regretful night, and come now to beg your forgiveness." He said he had arranged with Stanton for Scott to go to his wife's burial. In his own carriage, the President of the United States, the commander in chief took the colonel to the steamer on the Potomac River and wished him Godspeed.

Lincoln performed a Christ-like deed and walked the difficult and challenging path of a servant leader. May our nation, our families, our government, but most especially, the church of Jesus Christ, the Servant Son of God, always be blessed with such leaders.