

## “(Un)Like Everyone Else”

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Continuing a series *A King for God's People*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 8

August 21, 2016

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “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.”

But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. 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. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”

Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 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. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 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 that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “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.”

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

Then Samuel said to the Israelites, “Everyone go back to your own town.”

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 8

New International Version

After 20 years as a minister, I'm thinking of taking a step up in the world and becoming a political speechwriter. I am imagining how I would write the official announcement to accompany today's Scripture reading.

*In the name of the Lord Almighty, we the elders of the twelve tribes, descendants of Jacob, heirs to Abraham and chosen by God, are pleased to announce that, henceforth, Israel will have a king.*

*The time has come! The challenges we face call for strong, stable leadership. Criminals attack our way of life. The guilty strut and unpunished, while our women and children are afraid. Corruption reaches high. Government has failed. Our new king will bring justice.*

*Over our borders, threats are multiplying. Strangers foreign to our ways are breaching our borders. Hostile regimes scheme against. We only wish for peace. But when threatened, we will take action to defend ourselves. Our new king will make us secure.*

*We have never had a king. So we did extensive research, surveying the political systems of the great empires. Without fail, each of them is ruled by a king. We must adopt this best practice.*

*Remember our history. We have had strong leaders throughout. The great Moses led us from slavery. Joshua led us to victory. We can go on: Othniel, Ehud, Barach, Gideon, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson. A king will continue and strengthen this great tradition.*

*We have enjoyed the long and capable leadership of Samuel. We consulted closely with him about this transition. He and his sons have relinquished their positions; we thank them for their public service. Samuel will now have a new and important role as special advisor. He will lead the selection process for our new monarch.*

*Our king will make us great! You, God's people will enjoy the honour, prosperity, and security that are rightly yours. The Lord has taken us this far, and will continue to be on our side.*

*God save the king!*

## II

See how I used fear. Fear works! But dig deeper. It's not whether we are afraid. Some things are scary. How will we, as people of God, act when frightened? Like everyone else? Or, are God's ways different?

See how I used history? Moses! Joshua! The leaders in the Book of Judges. But who did I leave out? Deborah, a great leader! But under the monarchy system I am announcing,

a woman is almost never the sovereign.<sup>1</sup> So I skipped her. I left out Gideon who, when offered the kingship, refused. I don't want him on your minds.<sup>2</sup> Same with Abimelech. When he tried to become king, the people said "No way!"<sup>3</sup> Whenever someone appeals to history—and I love history—be sure to notice which lessons they are leaving out.<sup>4</sup>

See how I used Samuel. I left the impression he was onside. Really, this great prophet thought the idea of a king was terrible.

See I left out Samuel's warning. A king will take your sons into his army to die for him. And take your daughters into his palace to serve him. He will take your land and give it to his cronies. He will take your property to line his pockets. He will make you work for him. You will become slaves, Samuel warned we whom God rescued from slavery. (His warning came terribly true, by the way.)<sup>5</sup>

See how, most scandalously—I'd say blasphemously—I only mentioned the Lord when I wanted to slap God like a poster onto my own agenda.

### III

What went wrong?

Israel was in danger, from inside and outside. It was a time of international turmoil. Scholars call it the Bronze Age Collapse.<sup>6</sup> The Trojan War happened then, but it was only a small part of upheaval that reshaped the whole region. Ancient civilizations were quickly crumbling. The rules were changing . . . and no one had figured out the new ones.

God's People needed to change. The elders were right.<sup>7</sup> Here's the crucial question: What did they trust to shape their future?

*"Give us a king!"* the elders insisted. *"Then we will be like all the other nations. . . ."*

But God created, called and covenanted with Israel so it would be different.<sup>8</sup> Jesus grafts us into the community of God's People so we will be different.

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<sup>1</sup> Judges 4-5. On the scarcity of ruling queen's in the Ancient Near East, see Linda S. Schearing, "Queen" in David Noel Freedman (ed), The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, pp 583ff.

<sup>2</sup> Judges 6-8. See especially 8:22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Judges 9. Notice the parable Abimelech's brother tells about kingship in verses 7-22.

<sup>4</sup> Also, I did not mention Jephthah, a tragic leader (Judges 11:1-12:7) and Shamgar, a failed leader (Judges 5-6).

<sup>5</sup> See Ezekiel's condemnation, almost five centuries later, of Israel's "shepherds."

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Late\\_Bronze\\_Age\\_collapse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Late_Bronze_Age_collapse)

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 62.

<sup>8</sup> ". . . Israel was chosen by Yahweh and that this chosen community of covenant was not to be like the other nations. Rather, Israel was to order its life in the odd and demanding ways of torah and to rely on the inexplicable love and the remarkable promises of Yahweh (Ex. 19:46-; Deut. 7:7-11)." Brueggemann, 62.

This morning at Bethany, we baptised Reid. Reid's baptism makes him different. Not only is he born of Amanda and Ryan; he is being born anew by God's love. By grace, God is calling Reid, even now, to follow Jesus. As he trusts Jesus, loves Jesus, and follows him, Reid will be different. As he follows as part of this strange community of Jesus-followers called the Church, Reid will be different.

We are different *to bless* this world. Where people are crushed, divided, wounded, conflicted, dehumanized . . . where creation is exploited, abused, and ripped-apart . . . where the Creator and Lover of all is ignored, mocked, and misused . . . God calls us to be light in that darkness, to be healing amid that disease, to be hope amid that despair.

God calls us to be different so that in us—in how we live, in who we are—others will see, and hope, and believe.

#### IV

The world is changing, tremendously, even in our lifetime. The rules are different, and we're still figuring them out. There is sometimes turmoil. Sometimes nastiness. And sometimes we are afraid.

We, Jesus' Church, are needing to change to. Here's that crucial question again, the same Israel faced: What do we trust to shape our future?

I sometimes wonder if the unofficial mission statement of United Church folks is, "We will not be weird." I wonder. We are mainstream. We call ourselves "mainline." We expect to fit in.

So our reflex response to change is to change to become less-different. We hope that attracts people. We hope that keeps us relevant.

But if we are no different, will we serve them? Will we serve our world?

Let's remember the crucial question: What do we trust for our future? Who do we trust? To Whom do we belong?<sup>9</sup>

We need God to teach us, again, who we are and what we are for. So our transformation must be rooted in sustained and patient prayer. We must immerse ourselves in Scripture.

Yes, listen to great ideas from outside the church. We will be able to consider them openly and carefully, because we will know Whose we are, who we are, and what God has made

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<sup>9</sup> About tribal Israel, Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton write, ". . . both internal and external threats constituted major impediments to the biblical story in that they prevented Israel from fulfilling the mission for which God chose them. The question with which the book of Judges thus leaves us is whether a monarchy would solve these threats." Quoted in Michael Goheen, [A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 55.

us for.

V

Here's the big surprise in this episode.

Not them demanding a king. Not them ignoring Samuel's warning. Not them showing a deep lack of trust in God's faithfulness. We often ask for foolish things, often ignore God's prophets, and often show shocking unfaithfulness.

God's answer surprises me. To Samuel, God says: *"Do what they say. Make them a king."*

They were rejecting God. God let them. God did not approve. Still, God let it happen. And God continued to work through them.

That tells me something. No matter how foolish, poorly-listening and untrusting we are, God will still get God's way.

Consider this. Though this bad idea of a king, God gave us David. Through David, who as a king was both great and deeply flawed, God gave us Jesus.

Jesus is the King who was rejected by his People, by the world. Rejected for his People. Rejected for his world.

We take wrong turns, and there are consequences. Still, God works with whatever we do, and God's saving love will never be stopped.

Praise God! Amen.