

P3B 2024 I Samuel 8 & 11

You're probably familiar with the very old adage "Be careful what you wish for, because you may just get it" which has fueled plots in beloved literature from Aesop's fables to the Harry Potter series. It's also a good description of what happens to the people of Israel when, just as the Lord warned them, they jumped the fence and found out the hard way that the grass really was not greener on the other side.

Having been slaves in Egypt with no autonomy, the people of Israel don't know how to govern themselves. The Lord gives them the Law to teach them how to live in community with one another, freed from the tyranny of Pharaoh. God's Law is unique in that the Lord alone is to be Israel's king, without an earthly monarchy that would inevitably exploit them. This radical new society where nobody lords it over anyone else is supposed to function as a beacon of light and hope to the other nations, who will theoretically be drawn to the Lord by Israel's example. In practice, the newly-freed people of Israel still experience conflict, because they are human, and because it seems that right from the very beginning, even when they could read the Law off the original stone tablets, they still don't always agree on how to practice it with one another; so at the advice of his father-in-law, Moses chooses honest and trustworthy judges from the different tribes to guide the people.

This method more or less works through the wilderness journey and Israel's settlement in Canaan, until, as we read last week, their leadership stops being chosen based on honest character and righteous practice, and the judges begin to turn themselves into a de facto monarchy by passing the role down to their sons. Eli's sons are corrupt, so the Lord interrupts the succession by calling Samuel. This week, we read that Samuel has fared no better in raising righteous successors: the people complain to him, *You're old, and your sons do not follow in your ways. Appoint for us a king to govern us, like the other nations.* Now, there are a few things wrong with this way of thinking: first, just because Samuel is old doesn't mean he's unjust or incompetent; his role will change from judge to prophet, guiding the king specifically instead of guiding the nation generally, but he has years of service left, during which time he continues to act righteously. Second, the people seem to have forgotten that God provided good leadership when Eli's sons weren't up to the job; that's how Samuel got his position; there's no reason to believe God wouldn't provide another righteous leader if Samuel's sons are unfit. And finally, the rationale that Israel should have a king so that they can be *like the other nations* shows that they have completely lost the plot: Israel isn't *supposed* to be like everyone else; they are supposed to set an example of godly community so that everyone *else* will want to be like *them*.

Samuel warns the people that after all that the Lord has done to free them from slavery in Egypt, creating their own monarchy will effectively re-enslave them—just to one of their own instead of to Pharaoh. Samuel warns that a king will draft their sons to fight in battles and force their daughters into royal service. Every soldier in the king’s army and every courtier in the king’s palace takes one more farmer or tradesperson from the practical work of feeding and sheltering people, so the king will levy taxes to support his top-heavy institution. Instead of giving a tenth of their produce as an offering to the Lord, the only one who is supposed to rule over them, they will be required to give it to support the kings’ entourage. The people know that this is what happens, because that was what happened to them in Egypt under Pharaoh; yet they still demand a king. Spoiler alert: the Lord isn’t bluffing. David, their exemplary king, didn’t *go out before [them] and fight [their] battles* as they naively imagine; King David sent *them* off to battle while he stayed home to spy on the soldiers’ wives when they were bathing. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and he was supposed to be the smart one. Book after book of prophets pronounce the Lord’s judgment on the excess and injustice that resulted from Israel demanding a king...right up until they were marched off into exile.

As Americans, it’s tempting for us to say, *Silly monarchists; we don’t even need this story; we got rid of all those pesky kings in our revolution...*and thereby miss the point. This passage is not an argument for representational democracy over constitutional monarchy...as if there is no excess, corruption, or injustice in our government. The question here is not which form of government—or which political party—is best or right or pleasing unto the Lord; the question is, as people of faith, *Are we going to trust what the Lord tells us, or are we going to do our own thing? Do we believe that a life lived according to God’s Law, disciplined after the example and teachings of Jesus, is the best life we can possibly live, or are we going to be like the world: competitive, merciless, self-centered, and self-serving? Freed from the bondage of sin and death, are we going to serve the Lord, or are we going to sell ourselves into the slavery of someone else’s false promises?*

About this time last year, a group of the synod’s youth leaders distributed a collection of devotions, aimed primarily at youth, emphasizing that our worth as human beings comes from the love of God, not from being successful, productive, perfect, or the best at something. We thought that message was worth repeating, because even though we are promised that we bear the very image of God, we are surrounded by other claims of what makes us worthy. Whether we realize it or not, whether we can articulate it or not, we choose who and what rules our lives. We should be careful what we wish for lest we get it; may we learn to follow no king but the Lord alone.