

When I was studying to be a teacher, we talked a lot about different learning styles: some students can remember every word they hear in a lecture; some retain information better when they look at a diagram in a textbook; some need to do a hands-on project. The running joke became: *Which way do you learn best? The hard way.* We could describe the biblical narrative as the long history of our infinitely persistent God teaching a people who are absolutely determined to learn things the hard way—and that includes, of course, us.

If you think about it, between the creation story and Moses going up the mountain to receive the commandments, God only gave human beings one rule: *Don't eat the fruit from that tree.* Not a good start for us. When God leads the Israelites on their 40 year backpacking trip through the wilderness, it was after generations of slavery in Egypt, where they didn't have the opportunity to make any rules for themselves. When God gives them the first commandment: *I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me* it was not only about religion. To the Egyptians, the pharaohs were considered divine, so God's first commandment is also a promise that the people of Israel will not be subject to a ruler who will exploit them the way Pharaoh exploited them. The commandments created a community not so much of self-governance as divine governance; God would be their only king.

When they are first in the promised land, God leads the people with judges. Then the clergy get involved, which of course is where the wheels start to come off. Eli serves the people, but then Eli's sons are corrupt. So God raises up Samuel, and Samuel serves the people, but then Samuel's sons are corrupt. That takes us to today's story, when the people ask Samuel to appoint a king to govern them, so they can be like the other nations. That was the exact opposite of God's vision for Israel. They weren't supposed to be like other nations; the other nations were supposed to look to them and see them set an example of a different, better way of life. It took God ten plagues and parting the Red Sea to get the Israelites out of Egypt...then they decide that they want to be just like Egypt again.

Samuel is angry on God's behalf. But God, in what is truly one of the most heart-breaking verses of scripture, reassures Samuel: *they have not rejected you; they have rejected me from being king over them.* God is willing to do what they ask, but God tells Samuel to give them fair warning of what they will be getting into: They will lose their men in war when the king drafts them into his army; the king will take their women to cook for his court and to be “perfumers” (I think that's a euphemism; and King Solomon had 700 wives and 300

concubines—no one needs that much perfume); the king will take one-tenth of all their stuff to feed and outfit his army and his court—because when the king, his court, and his armies are no longer working the land to produce their own living, everyone else has to work harder to make up for it. In other words, *the Israelites asked God to invent taxes!* God fairly warned the people that establishing a monarchy would turn their free, equitable, peaceful society into a corrupt, unjust state of perpetual war. And still the people demanded to have a king just like all the other nations.

Before we congratulate ourselves for our random good fortune of having been born in a democracy, understand that this is not a treatise on which form of human government God prefers. This is an illustration of how human nature will always reject God and God's way of living. God's vision for human community is radically countercultural because God is infinitely more loving and merciful, just and generous than we ever choose to be on our own. We compete when God wants us to cooperate; we shout when God wants us to listen; we condemn when God wants us to forgive; we hoard when God wants us to share. God shows us a different way of being in the world because the way of the world is bad for us; yet we so often act against our own best interests by rejecting what God commands. God wants what's best for us. We are free to go another way, but we're going to learn that God really does know more than we do... and we're probably going to learn that the hard way.

The kings of Israel did just what God warned that they would do: they turned the egalitarian society envisioned in God's Law into their own version of pharaoh's Egypt—only worse, we might argue, because they did it to themselves. God would plead with the people through the prophets; God would chasten them through the exile; eventually God would come to them in person, in the person of Jesus Christ, to show them just exactly what the Law lived in love could do—and they would put God to death for it, and so do we. God says to Samuel, *they have rejected me...* which is as perfect a definition of sin as I have ever heard. But in the story of God's love affair with humankind, this chapter happened pretty early on. We rejected God, but God remained faithful to us. Thousands of years later, we're still learning the hard way, and God is still bandaging our scraped knees and drying the tears we cry when we run out and do exactly what God has told us over and over again not to do. Let us give thanks to God who never, ever gives up on us, no matter how much we deserve it.