

Choosing Tyranny over Trust

1 Samuel 8:4-20

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The problem with supporting free elections—as we are finding as the consequences of the Arab Spring unfold—is that there is nothing to prevent the people from choosing a dictator. And often they will. People are willing to pay a high price for security. They will give up their freedoms and their children and their money in order to be secure. They will give up peace itself. And they will most certainly give up something as fuzzy as trusting in God to keep them safe. Better to trust in an army than to trust in God.

This is the story of 1 Samuel chapter 8, which happens to be one of the lectionary readings for the third Sunday in Pentecost. You'd think, with the way the Old Testament uses the word "King" as a title for God, and the way David is held up as a model, that the Old Testament would be pro-monarchy. What you find in the section we call "the Deuteronomic history" is a strain that is very dubious of kings. The history we find in the books of Samuel and Kings often makes it clear that the monarchy was not God's first choice but a concession to the desire of God's people to compete with other nations on their own terms. The history also makes it clear that most of the kings were bad kings, unfaithful to God and self-serving in their motives.

In the account we read, some of the elders of Israel (we're not sure how broad that group was) come to Samuel, the prophet who has been serving as the judge, the chief administrator over the tribal confederation. There is no "nation of Israel" *per se* at this point. They are the twelve tribes who are united by covenant and worship, and by fighting together against the Philistines under the leadership of judges. The judges were not hereditary and they were not elected. They were charismatic leaders who were understood by the people to have been given God's Spirit and endowed for this particular task. The immediate problem facing the tribes is that Samuel is old and his natural successors, his sons, are completely corrupt.

So the elders say to Samuel, "Give us a king to govern us, like other nations." It may be hard for Americans to imagine asking for a king, but there were some people after our own Revolution who wanted to make George Washington king. If you watched American news people going ga-ga over the Royal Family at the Queen's recent Jubilee celebration, you might wonder if there isn't still some hunger for monarchy under the surface. But when God's people ask Samuel to give them a king, two problems come immediately to mind: First, they already have a King. Yahweh, the God who brought them out of Egypt and slavery, was supposed to be their King, and he was not supposed to have any rivals for authority. Second, they used to be ruled by a king—they called him Pharaoh—and that didn't work out too well. Why do you want a king?

The elders could have asked for a new judge to replace Samuel, but they want a complete change in the constitution. Why? Note what they say: "Give us a king to govern us *like the other nations*." They want to be like the other countries surrounding them. Of course the superpowers in Egypt and Mesopotamia had always had monarchies, but even the small countries had kings. A king meant a more permanent form of government. It meant more concentration of power. And perhaps most of all, a king meant a standing army rather than a volunteer militia.

Up to this point, Israel had been different from the other nations. It was a kind of radical experiment on Yahweh's part. He had led this oppressed people out of monarchy and oppression into freedom, and God chose *not* to make Moses their king. Moses was not to rule over the people. He was to judge between them on the basis of the covenant that God made with his people. Rather than a monarchy, Israel was called to be a covenant community which recognized God himself as the source of authority. Now I have to admit that our experiences with theocracies demonstrate that they can be a mere cover for tyranny. A religious leader can be as much of a despot as a secular one. Iran can be as oppressive as North Korea. But the idea that God had was that humans could live in community on the basis of ethical principles and spiritual practices that he would give them, and that if they really obeyed them they would not need centralized authority. They could live in tribes and have leaders over groups of tens and hundreds and thousands without a king or a palace or a standing army. They would only need judges to interpret the law and to bring conflicts to reconciliation. There were mixed results to God's "lively experiment," as the book of Judges makes clear. People were tempted to drift away into the pagan religions of their neighbors, and some of the judges were not trustworthy. But the basic idea still made sense, that God was the ultimate ruler of his people and they could live in community without a powerful authority structure.

But now everything changes. This story in 1 Samuel 8 is the end of the experiment. It is the people giving up on the dream and deciding that the model all the other countries use, of very clear top-down authority and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, is the best way to defend themselves and govern the nation. You can understand why the people would want a change. They are like the people today who say "the system is broken." The judges are corrupt. We need stronger leadership. We almost understand why people in Germany and Italy in the thirties supported dictators. We saw for ourselves how countries fell apart when dictators were removed in Yugoslavia and Iraq. Many people prefer an oppressive stability to the threat of chaos, and they prefer a military government to the chance of losing a war.

But Samuel is not happy with the demand for a king. He talks to Yahweh about it, and the Lord says, "Sam, you're gonna have to give them what they want. Don't take it personally. It's not about you. It's about me. They are rejecting me as their king." And there we see this historian's perspective on what happened. This is not just a sociological or political issue; it's a theological one. The real issue is that the people are giving up on the idea of having God as their king and living in covenant with God. They would rather have a human as their highest authority—which is a form of idolatry, a violation of the first commandment. The Lord says, "This is what they've done from the day I brought them out of Egypt and gave them freedom: rather than choosing to live in covenant with me, they have

abandoned me for other gods. And the king is just one more false god. Government as your source of security is a false god. They would rather do anything than trust in me. I'm gonna let them have it their way."

Even so, the Lord sent Samuel back to warn the people about what would happen if they got a king. It's quite a list:

1. He will take your sons and put them in his army.
2. He will spend a fortune on the military budget.
3. He will take your daughters to work for him in the palace.
4. He will take the best land for his cronies.
5. He will take 10% of your income and give it to government employees.
6. He will take your slaves and livestock for himself.
7. He will take a tenth of your sheep—and by then you will be his slaves.

Samuel is telling God's people to count the cost of big government. Are you sure you want to trust a government of men rather than God? Are you sure you want to trust horses and chariots for your security rather than the Lord? If you choose to go the route of monarchy and the route of competition with the other nations, it will drive you into debt and leave you enslaved to your own government. Samuel's final warning is this: when you find yourselves under tyranny and you realize that you have become slaves again as you were in Egypt, and you ask Yahweh to help you again, he will not answer you because you have chosen this hell for yourselves.

Is this irrelevant for us in 21st century America? Surely none of us would ask for a king. But here is what Samuel is saying to us: any time you depend on the military and the government for your security, you are failing to trust in the Lord your God. Any time your nation or your leaders begin to rival God in your hearts as your first concern, you have fallen into idolatry and God will not hear your prayers. God wants us as Christians to be a peculiar people; he wants us to be a community of believers who live in covenant with God and with one another. He does not want us to be like the culture at large, living by the power of the sword and the power of money. He wants us to live not by might, not by power, but by his Spirit.

But it is scary to live by the Spirit. The Spirit is invisible. The Spirit is unpredictable. Better the devil that we know to rule over us than the God we don't know. So given the choice between basing our lives on the policies of the Federal Reserve, or the protection of the US Army, or the high-handed policies of an Administration justifying anything they want in the name of national security—given the choice between acting as if government is real and acting as if God is real, most people will go with government. Even given a frank choice between tyranny and trusting God, most people opt for tyranny. It feels safer. It feels more comfortable. It feels less like a leap of faith.

Even after Samuel lists all the bad things that a king will do to them, the people say "No! We are determined to have a king over us." And listen to their two reasons. The first is "so that we may be like the other nations." So that we can fit in with the culture, so that we can hold our heads up high and feel good about ourselves. The second is "so that our king may lead us into battle." We feel threatened by the Philistines—it could just as easily be the Al Qaeda—and we no longer trust God to fight for us and lead us into battle. We want a real king who is also a general. We want a guy with a fancy hat and medals on his uniform to tell us what to do, not an invisible Spirit who shows up in smoke. What everybody understood was that getting a king meant getting a standing army, paying for professionals, buying horses and chariots and weapons. Getting a king means a huge part of our economy is going into the military budget, but that's what we want because we no longer trust God for our security.

Even though we didn't read "the rest of the story," I suspect you know how it goes. God tells Samuel to do what the people demand and set a king in authority over them. This is how God usually deals with us, isn't it? He lets us make our own choices. If we insist on having our own way, God lets us have it our way—and then he makes us deal with the consequences. God sometimes gives us what we demand even though it will be painful to us. He warns us—don't go there, you will lose your freedom—but if we exercise our freedom to choose to go there anyway, he lets it happen. God will not keep us from enslaving ourselves. We can enslave ourselves to government and the military-industrial complex; we can enslave ourselves to money and the pursuit of wealth; we can enslave ourselves to family systems which are idolatrous; we can enslave ourselves to oppressive religion; we can enslave ourselves to food or drink or drugs—and God will let us make our own choices. And if Samuel is right, if we choose to enslave ourselves even when God has warned us, God will not bail us out even when we cry out to him. He may say, "You had your chance to depend on me, but you chose to depend on something else."

So let's say we're in a mess, as Israel was a thousand years after Samuel. Let's say we have a long history of trusting in bad kings, trusting in chariots, trusting in the religious ideology that supports the nation-state. Along comes Jesus, and he says "Change your ways, because the kingdom of God is here." He's not talking about heaven.

He's talking about who's in charge. That phrase "kingdom of God" takes on a new meaning if we remember the history of God wanting to be the king of his people and being rejected in favor of human kings. Announcing the kingdom of God means that God is ready to take back his throne. Jesus is offering people a chance to live in the world again as God's people rather than the people of Herod or the people of Caesar. Jesus is saying over and over, "Live as if your security depended on God and not on government or money or religion." It is possible to exit the kingdom of man and enter the kingdom of God by trusting God completely for your life.

Jesus himself refused to trust the king or any earthly power. He trusted his Father God, and when the earthly powers did the worst they could to Jesus, God proved himself trustworthy by raising Jesus up. Now Jesus himself reigns with God as king of the universe, and he invites us to trust in him. By trusting him for our security, we enter his kingdom, we come under his reign. That is the good news that we proclaim: "Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!" May you place your trust not in the kings of earth but in the true King whose deepest desire is to set us free.