

## 1 Samuel 8: 4-20: Plan B

The title for today's sermon came from a commentary written on the Isaiah passage. Plan B as it is commonly used indicates a secondary course of action when things have not gone as planned originally. If we look at the entire Biblical story that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures, I think we must be actually nearing the end of the alphabet. An alternate reading for today from the Hebrew Scriptures was a passage from Genesis. We all know the story of the first two chapters of Genesis—how God created the world and found it good. In fact, when creation was finished, God pronounced it very good. Then we come to chapter three and humankind's first deviation from God's Plan. As part of what we considered last week about the Trinity, we mentioned that some theologians understand creation as an overflowing of God's love which sought to have more beings to love. In Genesis 3:8-15 we have an image of God walking in the Garden of Eden seeking to spend time with the beings created in God's own image. However, they are hiding because they have been disobedient and eaten of the one fruit forbidden to them. It wasn't like they weren't told the consequences beforehand—Genesis 2:17: "but of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die." Thus pain and death entered the created world. The status of humanity was greatly changed, but continued in the descendants of Adam and Eve. By chapter 6 it seems that God cannot find much in this world that could be called good. There we have the story of Noah who was righteous and walked with God. God it seems was still holding onto Plan A—being in relationship with humanity. But Noah was the only one found to be righteous. The wickedness of humanity grieved God so that according to Genesis 6:6 God decided to blot out from the earth what had been created, sparing only Noah and his family and two of all creatures when the earth flooded. God made a covenant with Noah and his family after the flood not to destroy life on earth again by water giving the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. The next major event happens when God enters into a relationship with a man named Abram and his wife Sari. The remainder of Genesis gives an account of three generations of this family and their relationship with God—obedience and disobedience both fill the account. There is a major gap in events at this point from the time the entire family of Jacob goes to Egypt in prosperity and the beginning of Exodus where they are an enslaved people. God does not seem to be in relationship with any particular people during this period, and indeed although God hears their cries, the Hebrew people do not seem to know anything about God when Moses arrives to tell the Pharaoh that God wants them to leave Egypt and go to Mount Sinai to worship. God once again initiates a relationship with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through Moses. God is very active in their lives—a presence among them. After fleeing Egypt it seems that even though they see how God protects and leads them, they really do not trust God. They continually go to Moses and when God makes an "in person" appearance at Mount Sinai to the whole congregation, they request that it doesn't happen again. They want to continue dealing with God through Moses. God proposes a covenant with them: Genesis 9 tells us God spoke to the people telling them through Moses how he brought them out of Egypt, fed them with manna and was in the cloud of smoke and pillar of fire guiding them. Genesis 9:4-5 reads: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles'

wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” Of course, although the people pledge to keep the covenant, much of the remainder of Exodus is about the ways in which they failed to trust. As they finally get to the border of the Promised Land, God reminds them that if they fail to keep the commandments and worship other idols, there will be consequences. Do you see the pattern—God’s plan in still Plan A—a relationship with the people? The leadership of the people passes to Joshua and the tribes enter and settle in the land in the area given to them. At the beginning of Joshua’s leadership, the people are circumcised as they renew the covenant of Mt. Sinai; at the end of Joshua’s life he again exhorts the people to remember who they are to serve and the people renew their covenant with God. Yet throughout the story, instances of disobedience continue which only get worse during the period of the judges. The twelve tribes remain loosely affiliated, but are almost constantly at war. Just as consistently, their disobedience to God is recorded; yet God remains faithful when the Israelites cried out to him. Almost every chapter in Judges begins “the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” with the final verse stating “in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” It seems that Plan A has not worked very well. The choices the people make consistently lead them away from God with whom they have established a direct relationship as their ruler, even though they hear God’s voice through a judge. At this point we are almost up to the conditions which existed at the time of our particular text this morning from 1 Samuel. In the Near East there was a standard understanding of kingship. The gods created the institution of monarchy so that their will would be executed on earth through earthly rulers. In the ancient Near East, kingship was initiated by the gods and descended onto humankind. Israel had no earthly king, but was under the rule of God. Our passage today presents a radically different origin of kingship for Ancient Israel. Rather than descending from above, the biblical texts describe the origin of kingship as “rising from below.” There is a period of transition coming, Samuel is getting up in years and has appointed his two sons as judges. This provokes a crisis as the elders of the tribes decide that the sons of Samuel are corrupt. It seems that they accept bribes and pervert justice. That surely disqualifies them to hold the office of judge. Yet what the elders propose is not to keep the system intact by replacement of Samuel’s sons, but instead they request to have a “king to govern” so that they could be “like other nations.” Samuel reacts to the elders’ request unfavorably. The translation most often used in this verse says Samuel was displeased. An older literal translation puts it that Samuel saw this as something evil. The verb here is used in other contexts to indicate sadness. The elders are reacting to the conditions stated at the end of Judges saying things have got to change, the system is broken. Samuel’s reaction does not focus on the request for change itself. He does not defend his sons. Samuel’s reaction is addressed to the choice the elders about what needs changing. Samuel knew that their request indicted a lack of faith in God. Samuel responds to their request with prayer. He has led a community of faith, but despite his efforts, the people desire to forsake the Lord and instead want to be like other nations. God offers comfort to Samuel by emphasizing that it is the people’s decision, implying their own autonomy to do right or to choose wrongly. Verse 7: and the Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people I all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” Ultimately, God grants people agency—the freedom to make good and bad decisions. But the freedom of

choice necessitates an obligation to take the consequences of such decisions. God lets them choose a king—and even participates in the choice of the ruler. But God tells Samuel to warn the people what will happen under a human monarchy—the list is long and ominous—the results of human kingship will not be good. Instead of being led by God who freed them from slavery, they are choosing to become enslaved to an earthly ruler. Our text ends with the people refusing to listen to Samuel saying, “We are determined to have a king over us.” It turns out that most of the warnings Samuel uttered came true in Solomon, but the monarchy endured and despite its origins, God uses the kingship to execute his will during the 400 years of Davidic reign. God chooses to limit his power to allow us to make decisions. But God also shows his power of grace, by allowing our poor decisions to be made great. Several commentators stated this as being shown in the redemption offered from above after many centuries through the coming of Jesus of Nazareth who was of the lineage of David. One commentator called Jesus’ coming Plan B. They also spoke of the old adage, “Everything happens according to God’s will.” If you were to ask Samuel if everything happens because God wills it, he’d likely laugh at you. He told the people what God wanted and even gave a detailed description of what would happen if they did their own thing. And yes, they insisted on having a king. This is where Jesus’ coming is described as Plan B. To me, God is still operating on Plan A—the desire to be in relationship with us because we are so loved. It is true that the biblical story describes many ways in which God has tried to establish this relationship—but the plan is and always has been the same. So if terming something “plan B” refers to the many different ways God has sought to establish a close relationship with us—we are well beyond the letter “B”. But if the commentator is referring to God’s plan and purpose itself, we are still on Plan A. As the Psalmist often reminds us God’s steadfast love endures forever. Thanks be to God.