

Picking Your Own King

The text we have before us today is one of those which narrates the “history” of the people who descended from Abraham, those God chose to mold into a nation. A nation which was to become a blessing to the whole world. As we read these histories, it is clear that the people had a problem accepting the program they were given; that the path they were shown was not one that they liked or wanted to follow. This is clear even as they begin the journey through the wilderness as the story is related in the book of Exodus. Having seen all that God’s leadership has given them, they still seem inclined to look elsewhere for the customs and traditions and ways to live; ways other than those given to them by their God who had claimed them and to whom they have promised undivided loyalty. After all, that was the first of those ten words or commandments to which they had sworn they would be faithful when they crossed the River Jordan. The events described in 1st Samuel come much later. Over two hundred years have passed...there have been cycles of judges raised to lead the people who have rescued them from their disobedience. Yet they do not seem to ever be able to remain loyal or remember what happens when they turn away from what they have been shown. When this passage begins the situation has reached a crisis as all the elders of Israel have gathered together to come to Samuel who is God’s appointed judge over Israel. Samuel is now an old man, and as these elders rightfully point out, his sons are not following in his ways. This is just as Eli’s sons did not follow in Eli’s ways and God appointed Samuel instead of his sons. But Samuel had begun to let his sons take over some of his duties, so these elders have come up with a better idea...a solution to this problem of sons who do not follow in the way of a “proper” judge. They come to Samuel with this request: “appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” Samuel is not pleased with this request that they have made for a king. Samuel knows that the Lord is the one that they should recognize as their ruler, as the one who is the one who should be governing them. But it is obvious that they have not recognized this, and are looking for a substitute. Samuel goes and lays this before the Lord who then tells him: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.” When you hear this text, when you listen to this reality expressed here of the constant rejection of the people of the Lord’s kingship, do you recognize the deep and abiding tragic nature of this story not only for the people of Israel, but for us as well as we too often reject God’s kingship over our lives. God continues to advise Samuel to give warning to these elders about the consequences of their “solution” of seeking to have a mortal king to govern them like the other nations have—a warning about the ways of mortal kings who have power over other mortals...the things that they will do and the resulting oppressions which will happen. It seems that Samuel’s warning could not shake the desire of Israel’s elders to be like

other nations. No matter how much Israel wanted kingship, no matter how attractive it appeared, installing a monarchy would not be a good idea. Israel was supposed to be unique because God would be its leader, and they would follow divine ways, not human ones. They knew Samuel's sons would not qualify, that something had to change. Yet, just as years earlier when an entire generation died in the wilderness because it could not imagine a life of freedom, this generation could not imagine or envision a nation led by God. So since they could not envision being led by God, they decided that what they needed was what everyone else had. How many times has that been on our lips as a reason for something we have done: "But everybody else is doing it!" I know I heard that often from my daughter about what her friends were doing when she was told she wasn't allowed to go to something or do something that absolutely everybody else was allowed to do. When we read this text, the question for us becomes does it remain in the context of the story of the Hebrew people and their choice; do we leave it there as we view the entire history of the nation state and see where their choice led, knowing that Samuel's warnings were valid. The mortal kings they desired and received would lead them into disaster after disaster. However, we also know that God never totally abandoned them and through God's grace and mercy provided redemption and a king for the whole world in Jesus his son. Though the whole story we know that God's will and purpose for good will triumph. But is that the only message for us? Yet there is another possibility for that text to have a message for us in our time and place. Although in our time and culture, especially in our culture where we value independence, we do not like to speak of kings or being ruled...often not even being ruled by common sense. Yet as it becomes plain in many of the parables which Jesus tells to the crowds, there are ways in which we pick our own kings...the things in our lives to which we give the most allegiance. When God gave in to the request of the elders, the voice that is heard through the text is not one of anger at their rejection but one of deep resignation. "Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day." God says, they have been doing this to me for centuries now, ever since I took them out of bondage in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. They have been forsaking me for other gods...replacing me. That's what this request amounts to—replacing me, their divine King, with a merely human king who will function like a god in their lives. The kings Israel demands will make them poorer and less free than living under God who desires their love, these kings who will have power over them which they will abuse...something their divine King would never do. If we take a careful look at our society, at who or what have we enthroned as king, what do we see? A year or two ago I would have suggested materialism...and that is still a good candidate for what many people worship or give their strongest allegiance. Personal happiness and success is associated strongly with what one can consume and what one owns making it high on the priority list for many. But this past year has presented me with another candidate which I find even more disturbing. It is the total absorbing love of self. Our politics and social structure has become increasingly focused on the

individual. Politicians seeking to respond to various people and groups who seek to exert their rights over others. The scene of public discourse is becoming dominated by vitriol and debasement of individuals. Individuals are claiming that their rights supersede the rights of others. The view of most is now that we are self-made people. We rely on self-esteem and self-image and self-love to define us. Our world teaches us that my story is the most important story and others are simply there as either stepping stones or obstacles to the achievement of my self-identity. It seems that we are picking our own kings...and have decided that the king is us. That is not good news for anyone. That is as far from the news which our Lord came to share as it is possible to get. Our King calls for us to abandon self for others and to declare that the love of others is what defines the kingdom to which we are called to belong. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.