

PSALM 113

- ¹ Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD;
praise the name of the LORD.
- ² Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time on and for evermore.
- ³ From the rising of the sun to its setting
the name of the LORD is to be praised.
- ⁴ The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens.
- ⁵ Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
⁶ who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
⁷ He raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
⁸ to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
⁹ He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

1 SAMUEL 7.2-17

- ² From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.
- ³ Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, 'If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.' ⁴So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the LORD only.
- ⁵ Then Samuel said, 'Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.' ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and said, 'We have sinned against the LORD.' And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

7 When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸The people of Israel said to Samuel, 'Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.' ⁹So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt-offering to the LORD; Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt-offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. ¹¹And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.

12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us.' ¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

15 Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD.

SERMON

This summer we're going to be doing a sort of fly over of the stories of the leaders of ancient Israel and Judah. It's going to be fast, just a week on each leader, with lots of great kings and queens left out...and tons of stories of the ones we will hear about left on the cutting room floor. There's just too much to do, even over the span of 12 weeks. If you're curious, you can pick it up and read for yourself: Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Last week you all got to hear a bit about Deborah, perhaps the most famous of the Judges of Israel, and next week we'll hear about our first king: Shaul, or Saul as he's better known to us.

But between those two, the Judges and the monarchy, there was a shift, and it's not a gradual one, it's sharp, like a fulcrum, tipping between one and the other. And his name was Samuel.

You all know a lot about him, even if you don't remember it. Samuel was born to Hannah and Elkanah, righteous and good people who feared the Lord. Hannah was barren for many years, and her song of thanksgiving upon giving birth was passed down through the generations. It's known to us as Mary's song, the Magnificat. Hannah, upon giving birth to her son Samuel, she turned him over to the priest Eli, so that Samuel might be brought up in the temple, learning to serve the Lord.

And it happened one night that the boy Samuel heard a voice. Not once or twice, but three times, and finally the slight dense but wise Eli understood, telling Samuel that it was the Lord. When the voice came again, Samuel answered, and God shared with him some terrible news: Eli, Samuel's mentor and boss, the head priest, his sons were too corrupt to serve, and would be summarily replaced...by Samuel...and in the morning he had to report the message to Eli. Samuel did, and all that the Lord said indeed happened, with the dynasty of Eli wiped out, and Samuel installed in their place.

And so it went for a while, Samuel leading the people as a prophet, but there is no real leader, and so one day when the Philistines attack, the people are plunged into political crisis: who will be our leader? And Samuel steps up. [read]

Samuel became the last judge of Israel, serving as a faithful conduit of God's message and will for the people, and for a time, there was peace. Next week you'll hear about what happened next, as Samuel's sons took over and messed it all up and the people demanded a king, and God gave them one, King Saul. But, for now, I think it's interesting to just look at this little, brief chapter: the time of Samuel, Judge of Israel.

There's this repeated verse throughout the book of Judges: "there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." This phrase repeats over and over again, and the book gets darker and dark, as Israel falls further into the depravity of their own violence and hatred and selfishness. And very often, I think, it's easy to read Judges and assume that the system was bad...and that was the problem. Just get a king, a firmer hand on the bureaucracy, and everything would be fine! But Samuel, in this one little chapter, refutes that notion. Samuel, the last of the Judges, was among the fairest and best of all. He led the people according to God's will, and peace prevailed. It's as if Samuel's story is there to tell us to notice the right part of the verse. Not "there was no king" but "everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

Honestly, if you read the entire book of Judges, you'd be forgiven for assuming it was a structural problem, a systems level issue...rather than a personality thing. And, coming from the year 2019, I think it's a pretty natural position and perspective to assume: those ancient people, they just hadn't figured out a good system yet! They were so primitive and behind the times, all they needed was a little democracy and they'd get it sorted out. But the fact is, as we read through the kings and queens, I think we'll see they're no better...and as the story of scripture and history unfolds it makes me wonder: is it ever really about the systems? The judges versus the kings versus a democracy or an oligarchy or whatever? Or does that second half—everyone doing what's right in their own eyes—have more to teach us?

Reflecting on history, I think this might bear out. Monarchies are somewhat anathema to our American point of view—but there have been excellent Kings and Queens through time...and even more that were a mixed bag. Democracies might be all the rage these days, or even back in ancient Greece, but for all their myriad positives, they can be hijacked for evil with the right leaders and circumstances, right? And I'm certainly not

going to stand here and condone a dictatorship, but by the same token—it's sort of a fun thought experiment to imagine a dictator after God's own heart...and I think you'll find that King David might fit that bill.

All of this to say: Samuel's story, the tipping point between one structure and the next, it's fascinating not because of what it says, but because of what it shows. When leaders are humble and serve in a way that mirrors God's desires for the people and the land, good can flourish. It's not the system, it's the people, the intention, the humility.

When I wrote this sermon earlier this week, I was floundering a bit for some kind of application, because so far as I know, none of us in this room are currently running for office or managing a political system. But that's a cop out, right? It's easy to say: well, I'm no senator, so it's not on me! And it's true that we may have less decision making power than those we've elected.

But we're currently living in a country committing some vast atrocities against incredibly vulnerable people, right? It is fundamentally apolitical for me to state that children should have access to medical care, education, caring, responsible adults, and for the love of Jesus Christ and all his disciples, a toothbrush and some soap and clean clothes. That children Enoch's age should not be left as the primary caregivers for sick infants. Our great modern democracy has not protected us from doing horrible things to migrant children and their families, those who are here seeking legal asylum. It's not the system, it's the heart and values and lack of compassion of our leaders that we're seeing. There may be no king in the United States, but we're pretty dang good at doing what is right in our own eyes.

Samuel's story becomes a small part of the vast mosaic that is scripture and history, and I see in him a story that is repeated over and over again. God has no great preference for style of governing. God is as present and active with the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt, as with the Judges of the 12 tribes, as with the kings and queens of the monarchy of Israel, as with the prophets with the people in exile, as with Jesus and the disciples under the occupation of Rome, as with the saints of the high medieval church serving in lockstep with the Holy Roman Empire, as with the elected officials of our democracy today. God is not concerned with the form, but with the function: are you serving your neighbor as yourself? Are you treating one another with compassion, kindness, and placing the needs of others ahead of your own? Or are you merely doing what is right in your own eyes?

I think this bears a little introspection, especially as we are in this patriotic season between the celebration of Juneteenth, or the final abolition of slavery in the US, and Independence Day next week, let's take the message of Samuel to heart. Let us not lose heart or our own moral compass and righteous, compassionate anger in the face of great atrocity taking place on our doorstep. Instead, let us be people who know our system alone cannot insulate us, but instead we must work for and demand the kind of leadership which enacts God's love for all people.