

Sermon, 6/10/18

Joshua Daniels, PhD

SPR: 1 Samuel 8

In today's reading from 1 Samuel, I think God is only *partially* right when assessing Israel. According to this assessment, the people want a king because they reject God. The desire for a king expresses a desire to be "like other nations," which is necessarily a rejection of God's rule because the other nations worship other gods. For the God of Israel, this is the latest in a history of rejection going back to Moses's time in charge—but I want to cut Israel some slack here. Earlier in 1 Samuel we learn that, while Samuel was in charge, Israel was defended well from her enemies, particularly the Philistines. When Samuel hands over the reins to his sons, things fall apart. Here's verse 3, just before today's reading: "[H]is sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." So the need for good leadership is a real problem, and Samuel doesn't provide a constructive alternative to their proposal for a king. Given that this is a time of great and true uncertainty for the people, Samuel's displeasure seems rather dismissive.

Which is not to say I'll be endorsing Israel's proposal for a king. Here's a more complete assessment of Israel: the people aren't only rejecting God when asking for a king, they're also rejecting themselves. Instead of turning inward and looking for leadership solutions from among themselves—instead of consulting their history with God and the sorts of leaders that God's historically provided—the people turn outside of themselves, as though opting against their own historical identity as God's people. Now as a general rule I'm all for being open to the differences of others—but at the risk of over-psychologizing, I can't help but wonder if the people's refusal to stay grounded in themselves at this moment, is part of a failure to value themselves as God does. Samuel's warning about the ways of kings is a catalog of exploitations, from property to family, and the people is willing to submit to them. "[W]e are determined to have a king over us," the people say, even if it means the loss—no, the taking!—of those very things with which God historically blesses them. The people are deliberately choosing a human, abusive form of leadership over God's care for them. Why would they do this?

I had a hard time with this question. In fact, I had a hard time with this sermon, which was a new experience for me. I've preached a handful of sermons in my life, but I've never had difficulty before. In the past when I've prepared sermons, I've experienced the scriptural readings as keys, and after pondering them for a while one would begin shining brighter than the others, and then this key would unlock a door inside of me, and there was my sermon, waiting to be let out. This

time, all of the keys remained grey, and they didn't fit in any of the doors inside of me, but it didn't matter anyway because all of the doors were already open, and there was nothing behind them, just empty rooms. But empty of what? Of certainty—I think. In the past I had a clear sense of who I was and wasn't, a clear sense of what my place in the church was and wasn't. These senses are now gone: without being sure who I am, and where I fit here at SPR, it's difficult to find a word that's authentically mine *and* worthwhile to be addressed to us.

I shared this experience of myself as so many empty rooms to my spiritual director. Her response was, "Now, thank God for that." For a long while I thought, "Thanks for nothing," but somehow my ironic, snarky gratitude gave way to a sincere thought: it occurred to me that I wasn't empty of certainty, but rather, full of uncertainty; it occurred to me that uncertainty is a presence, not an absence, a gift, not a deficit, a source of possibility, not barrenness. I may have been more certain in the past, but then most of the rooms inside of me were locked. Now, I could be open.

I wonder if the people of Israel experienced their uncertainty as a lack in themselves, and if that led them to believe they were no longer worth God's care, which made them willing to accept exploitation. I wonder how things might have been different if they had experienced their uncertainty as part and parcel of God's care for them, as a blessing. It's probably the American in me, but the breakdown of justice that occurred under Samuel's sons seems to have provided a great opportunity to experiment with more democratic forms of leadership—an opportunity to open themselves inward and create something new among themselves, rather than copy some external model. There's no guarantee it would've worked—that's one cost of uncertainty—but it would've required the people to look at each other in the face and to say, and believe, "We're enough for us, because we're enough for God."

Let me be clear about what I mean by this: "We're enough for us—or we ought to be—because we're enough for God." It's not a counsel for complacency, as though no matter what we *do*, it's all good enough for God. No, I mean it as a statement of fitness: what we *are*—beings rife with uncertainty, leaving a trail of failures behind us—is good enough for God to care for us. And if it's good enough for God, it ought to be good enough for us. We are good enough to care for ourselves. Can you see where I'm going with this? We don't have a Peter-shaped hole, unless we insist on seeing it that way, tracing its outline again and again and again until we think we're certain we know what fits there. But maybe we have a Peter-shaped field of possibility, a place to cultivate ourselves, to strengthen our own gifts, or even discover new

ones, to grow ourselves in ways we couldn't imagine before, to flower and flourish until we can no longer see the original borders of the field that Peter gave us when he moved on— that he *gave* us, not left us.

I wonder if you can tell I grew up congregationalist. We're going to get a new rector, as surely as Israel got her king; I'm not at all trying to subvert that. But aren't you curious about what we could be, before we welcome our new rector? Aren't you curious what we could become, if we give our new rector even more than we're already prepared to give? I know I am.