

1 Samuel 8

2 Corinthians 4

Mark 3

A Royal Mistake?

Can you guess what happens with this scenario: a daughter of Dutch immigrants grows up hearing stories of family in the Netherlands and about the Dutch people's affection for their royal family, she is at the same hospital where the Dutch family visits...and the same week is handed this haunting text from 1 Samuel 8, about the Israelites' request for a king?

Life is full of mixed messages. From Tuesday's dignified, exciting visit by King Willem Alexander and Queen Maxima to today's sad story of the Israelites' request for a king, we are confronted with the ironies that challenge us through all of life's ordinary and extraordinary times.

1 Samuel 8 is a story of Israel's struggle for control. Samuel feels rejected; God clarifies that it is God's kingship that's being rejected. The ominous tones of the story become explicit when God tells Samuel to forecast for the people what will happen when they get what they ask for: the ways of a selfish king will take their toll on everyone.

How did the Israelites get to this point? Earlier in 1 Samuel, we met Hannah, who encounters the priest Eli. Samuel, Hannah's son, is raised in the temple with Eli. Many years later, the cryptic but affirming summary of his legacy as priest, prophet, and leader is that "he administered justice to Israel." Despite Samuel's solid, secure leadership, the people of Israel see other nations with attractive, powerful kings...and they want to be just like them.

Like most complicated stories, there is far more here than we might know. Both Eli's sons and Samuel's sons are disappointingly rotten apples. The request for a king could be a peaceful coup d'etat, but the way the narrative is told doesn't allow for us to positively interpret the request for a king. There are other issues at stake in this request for a monarch, and for the sake of today's focus, I'll try to remember what I'm learning from the restorative circles process: there are lots of rabbit trails, and we don't need to go down all of them.

Speaking of the restorative circles, Samuel could be our model for leading a restorative circle. This narrative in 1 Samuel 8 includes many references to listening and hearing what's being said, which is an essential component in restoring understanding and healing relationships. God tells Samuel to listen, and reinterprets the message Samuel heard. God tells Samuel to clarify for the people the outcome of their request. The people refuse to listen; Samuel hears their refusal, and reports this to God. God tells Samuel again to listen to the people, and give them what they want.

This may not be a great resolution to the conflict from the point of view of God and Samuel. But see how obedient and faithful Samuel is in mediating between God and the people. God tells Samuel that the rejection Samuel feels is really what's being projected onto him. Somehow, Samuel is able to function despite what he feels are insults and betrayal, and a terrible request. Samuel is a preeminent model of sacred leadership, especially as he continues to function as priest and prophet and mediator once the kingship is established. If you continue reading in 1 Samuel 9, you will see that Samuel continues to intercede for the people well after the king loses his glamor and appeal.

What is it about royalty that appeals to us? As Americans, we do live out of a mixed-up sense of attraction to royalty.

When a royal wedding takes place, or a princess like Charlotte is born, we watch for how they display grace under pressure. The royals represent, ideally, anyway, the best of human behavior and dignity. Pomp and circumstance can thrill us as we glue our eyes to scenes of inauguration and coronation--or even, a Triple Crown winner. We also watched carefully when the Dutch royal couple visited sick children in a hospital in Grand Rapids, and when they represent a country's grief at a time of crisis. Like our fascination with Princess Diana, we observe the royals as representatives of countries in both grand and terrible circumstances.

I think there is the attractiveness of the dignity and poise they represent that we want to emulate. King Willem and Queen Maxima, for example, represent beauty--not just in their appearance, but beauty in the sense of paying attention to the glory around them. They ate with the wealthy and powerful. They spoke and carried themselves with respect and decorum. And they honored garden volunteers; they planted a tree, they gave a Dutch resistance participant deep distinction and gratitude.

Such dignity and grace is aroused in each of us as bearers of the image of God. Even the Heidelberg Catechism tells us as much in question and answer 32, which asks "why are you called a Christian?" The answer reminds us that we share faith in Christ, and we also share in Christ's anointing. We will rule with Christ in eternity over all creatures because we are united with him. We are royals--because we are united with Christ, awaiting our entry into Christ's presence on the heavenly throne.

Being united with Christ is mystery and beauty of the tallest order. When I read that "this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure," I turn to the essay by CS Lewis in which he says,

We do not merely want to **see** beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words--to be **united with the beauty we see**, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become a part of it."

This description is like the sanctification process. God is at work in us to help us to be our very best selves, the most true to being creatures who reflect the glory and image of God. It is God's Spirit working within us to remind us that we are children of God, heirs of Christ... heirs of the kingdom. We await the building from God, eternal in the heavens.

The most remarkable, profoundly gracious thing about this story in 1 Samuel 8, though, is God's follow through. Watch what God does in the process of letting Israel have what it wants. Instead of considering this to be a royal mistake, God uses the monarchy to establish his people, to set a template for a king that later is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Considering that God calls the people's request for a king to be rejection of God's own kingship, God nevertheless uses the kingship for working out his purposes. When Israel acted like the prodigal Son, God did not lose heart over the prodigal children.

In the meantime...while we're being worked on as royalty-in-progress, today we ordain and install new officers for our consistory. While some of you are being set apart for now, consider that you're in great company of set-apart folks. As you take on these duties, consider this from my experience with our Hope Church consistory and other ecclesiastical bodies:

I am impressed by not only the weight of our responsibilities, but the dignity, seriousness, prayerfulness and respect with which we discern hard choices. I have been fortunate to have participated with some wise, patient, loving people faced with oversight on matters that reveal human despair and human dignity. I have strong and deep memories of prayerful, loving people seeking God's movement and presence as they lead the people of God. It can be a beautiful thing. Because of God's Spirit at work in us, I have seen and been summoned not to lose heart, but to hope and pray that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase our thanksgiving, to the glory of God. I hope this is true for you--elders, deacons, members of Hope Church, and for all God's people.

Amen.

Eternal God, your Son Jesus Christ, now exalted as Lord of all,
pours out his gifts on the church. Grant us that unity which your Spirit gives,
keep us in the bond of peace, and bring all creation to worship before your throne;
for you live and reign, one God, forever and ever. Amen.