

TOLD YOU SO
1 SAMUEL 8
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
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Our second text comes from the Histories: First Samuel 8. Listen again for the Word of the Lord:

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ²The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. ³Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, ‘You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.’ ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to govern us.’ Samuel prayed to the Lord, ⁷and the Lord said to Samuel, ‘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. ⁸Just 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. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.’

¹⁰ So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’ ²¹When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. ²²The Lord said to Samuel, ‘Listen to their voice and set a king over them.’

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

One thing you must know about having bad depth perception is that it makes activities with wheels difficult. Frankly, it makes walking difficult too, but when you add speed and agility, you are bound to end up face first in the dirt more often than not. So it is that in the course of my tenure at Harbison West Elementary School I crashed (and totaled) two bicycles, one big wheels (not mine), and a minor tractor on my Grandfather's farm. The thing is you just never know how far away that wall is or how close you're cutting the curve. Sure, someone may be hollering at you to change course, to stop, to turn right now, but your eye tells you that you're fine. You've got plenty of time.

What you see, at least in my case, is not always what you get.

The elders of Israel looked around and they saw grandeur and threat. Egypt, a perennial menace; Babylon, with her young warriors; the warring Hittites to the north.

When they looked at their own tribes they saw only old Samuel and his no-good sons. To this point, Israel had been ruled by judges, leaders who rose up in times of crisis, to quell external threats. Some were good—Deborah and Samuel. Some failed. But Israel persevered.

The system of the Judges wasn't perfect but it reflected a theological reality: the Israelites were God's. God's liberating rule was built into the fabric of their lives and was meant to be reciprocated in their living: God brought them from slavery in Egypt. Never would they serve any other ruler, be it a Pharaoh or a monarch. Their lives were to be ruled by God's will, lived in freedom for faithfulness, freedom for one another.

But the elders were getting nervous. Egypt and Syria and Babylon had armies. Armies and kings, *human* kings. And they decided they wanted a human king too. They wanted to be like everybody else.

Maybe it's common sense, becoming your like enemy in order to protect yourself from him. But their desire betrayed their faithlessness. The very community called to serve God, to proclaim God, to live God, by their demand for a human sovereign rejects God. It is a refusal of covenant faithfulness, and a failure of memory and imagination. The tension in the text is palpable.

And reminds me of my mother. In 2000 the first Razor Scooter was released. Aluminum frame, lightweight, a little brake at your back foot. It was wildly popular that Christmas. I would never get one — I was too old, a junior in high school with no business on a child's scooter. We spent that holiday in Atlanta with family. As my little cousin Thomas unwrapped his razor scooter, and without any prompting, my mother

looked across at me and offered a warning: “you will break your leg.” I scoffed. “Don’t come crying to me,” she added.

God knew what Israel wanted, knew what they would do. “Listen,” God instructs Samuel, and we are primed to expect a divine rebuke – a good old talkin’ to about the dangers of doing what everyone else is, of following you friends off of a cliff, of picking your own king.

But that’s not at all what happens. God isn’t directing the elders to turn back to him, God is demanding that Samuel obey the elders. “Listen,” the English translation says, and I’ll tell you, it’s an even stronger directive in the Hebrew. “Obey” or “heed” would be better. God tells Samuel to give the people what they want. Warn them, God says, and then heed their demands.

“You will break your leg,” my mother said. It’s not what she wanted. She just knew. For Samuel the warning is even more dire. Six times to the elders Samuel repeats the phrase “He will take” – “take” is the dominating verb of verses 10-18. The king you choose will take and take and take. And not for your good, not for the common purse, he will take for his courts and courtiers, for his army, his fields. Fidelity to a human king is no better than electing your own bondage, conscripting your own sons, forfeiting your yields, handing over your daughters. An embrace of human systems is not only a rejection of God, it is a rejection of the freedom that God and only God *gives* and *gives* and *gives*.

“Obey them,” God says to Samuel. Give my people their king.

We often imagine, wrongly, the “God of the Old Testament” as cold and cruel, aloof, capricious, and unyielding, utterly unlike the revelation of that very same God in the New Testament. But here, in the heart of the Old Testament, we have a powerful example of God’s enduring faithfulness in relationship. God wills the good for his people. God wants to be their sovereign, wants their freedom. But God will not trample their desire. They do not heed the warning. They demand a king. And so it is. No punishment, no ire.

God grants his crown to a lesser king. In a profound act of self-limitation God empowers the Hebrew people. God blesses Saul, whose kingship ends in disgrace. And then God blesses David, a complicated mess of a man, devout and full of foibles. God remains faithful to the very people who rejected him.

Sometimes kingship went well. God was there. Often it did not. God was there too. Which brings me to Christmas.

I reckon you may have an idea of how that day unfolded. And friends, I'm glad to tell you my mother was wrong. I did not break my leg. But there is a little mark on my forehead, an indentation. You may think is a wrinkle. It is not.

The race started well. I was winning. I had never gone so far, so fast. But there had been an ice storm the day before. And I couldn't quite see the shaded patch of road midway down the hill. Until, that is, I could. I tried to step off the scooter, to avoid the ice but it turns out I was already on top of it. I'd cut too close. I must've looked like the road runner, my legs were moving frantically, my upper body completely still ... until my forehead met the curb. And then Christmas became a crime scene.

I always had trouble—come to think of it now it could have been because of all of the concussions I must have sustained—but anyway, I had trouble remembering my history with wheels. I just kept trying. I did not see the inevitability of injury. The complexities of bad depth perception somehow infected my brain and I eprepetually assumed this was my moment. So I did exactly what I wanted to do, exactly what every other kid was doing that Christmas morning. But my mother remembered. She remembered the bloodied knees, the busted lips. And she warned me.

Perhaps these stories about kings and monarchies feel far off and irrelevant. But this passage, which marks a critical moment in Israel's history—the moment Israel moves from a covenant tribe to a nation—is meant to stir and provoke even us.

The story of Scripture from the Exodus through its final pages, written on our hearts and in our living, is the story of a forgetful people called to faithfulness, a people who see the Kingdom, who know the power of God, who are granted *freedom* but choose instead lives ensnared by selfishness, idolatry, and outright fear.

At the same time, and this is what I want you to remember today, it is a story of God's absolute faithfulness. That is what we mean when we speak of God as a parent: the strength to hold back, the perseverance and love to stay, despite our rejections.

Our text today asks us to consider Israel's identity—to whom *should* this people belong? A king? A God? And how should that belonging shape their life together, their individual lives, their economies, and their families? How do they live as God's, even when the theocracy fades?

The question is not irrelevant. Samuel asks it of us. To what have you granted your devotion? What compels you? What, or who, is your sovereign? And how does that inform your life?

A people bound to the market will come to think of one another as commodities, trading up for what one person can offer, discarding those with no external value.

A people bound to violence will think of each other as threatening, will bend their will toward domination, will easily discard those who stand in their way.

A people bound to power will use one another as means to an end, tools in a trade for recognition and influence.

Our kings, our gods, even today *take and take and take*. The pomp may look good on this side of the parade, but when it comes to human kings, human desires, human wants, what you see is rarely what you get.

But there is a better way. For Israel the monarchy worked until it didn't, until a string of bad kings made terrible deals, divided land, punished their own, and were finally defeated and carried into exile. Kingship from below, devised by human beings for their own betterment, for their own security, failed.

But even as they rejected him God refused to abandon his people. Kings rose and fell; God remained. God walked with them, even as they walked away. God would not compel their fidelity, trample their freedom — that taking was for earthly kings — God would abide, correct, teach.

And at the right time, in the darkness before dawn, God gave them another king, a King from above. He did not ride in at the helm of a military parade, he carried no army, no clout. He was born in poverty in David's little town. It was another act of self-limitation, a crown eschewed, a final redemption. That king, in the line of David, reminded us and reminds us that our God remains. Despite our clamoring for other kings, other gods, despite our wanting to be like anyone but who we are, who we are called to be, our God remains.

And our God calls us on, into the world, to bear and be his Kingdom. What, in the 21st Century, does it mean to belong to the peculiar Kingship of God, to the cradle, to the cross, to the empty tomb?

Emily Sailer sang it best: "The closer I'm bound in love to you, the closer I am to free." God grants us freedom that we might turn to turn to God and to turn to one another, God grants us freedom for each other. Not as competitors, not as commodities, but as brothers and sisters, bound by the living, vibrant love of God our King. Bound by the community of the covenant which extends beyond nationality, beyond border, beyond class, sexuality and gender. God limited himself to and bound

himself to us, in a covenant, in a king, in a cradle and a cross, we are called to the same.

I tried to hide the accident. My knuckles were bruised and bleeding, my pants ripped at the knee, a steady stream of blood pouring down my face. In a state of absolute delusion I ran—well, hobbled—back to the house and cleaned myself up. I fell asleep for a good four hours and when I awoke I told my mother confidently that I had simply tripped walking out on the porch. Nevermind, she'd already set out a salve, was cleaning the wound and bandaging it. She'd washed my clothes, and presumably checked my pulse to make sure I was alive.

“You’ll break your leg,” she said. And she’d have bound it up. She never did ask me what happened, though I think she may have known.

We bear the wounds of our choices, and the choices others have made for us. There’s no way around it. But God binds them up. And God calls us on. Not to some dispassionate utopia: but to life in the midst of other kingdoms, other powers, other forces who fight for our fidelity.

Look around. There’s a lot you may not have: the money, the promotion, the car, the family. Look again. In our search for kings and gods, for answers and certainties, we have missed the God who stands ready, the God to whom we already belong. The God by whom we belong to one another, who warns and welcomes. *Amen.*

—*Leigh Stuckey*