

“Where Do We Place Our Deepest Trust?”

1 Samuel 8:4-20

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In God We Trust – or so we say as a nation, as churches and as people. This has been our national motto since 1956. We have put this claim on our currency since 1957. We even put it on our license plates in some states and just this week our legislature is proposing that we display these words at our schools. In God we trust... or do we? We say we place our deepest trust in God and we want to believe we do, but often it seems like we hedge our bets.

We trust in God, but we want to have enough money to cover all possibilities. The petition for “daily bread” in the Lord’s prayer is fine, but it seems prudent to cover more than one day at a time. We trust in God, but we want the strongest military on the planet, enough to defeat any enemy a hundred times over. For all our talk about peacemaking, we do live in a violent world. We trust in God, but when our loved one is sick, we seek the best medical care available. This just makes sense.

And to be clear, placing our trust in God does not mean that we cannot do anything to help ourselves. God often works through human instruments and God expects us to use the abilities we have to address our needs. But if we are honest, we will admit that while we want to place our trust in God, it is difficult to do so at times.

I think of the snake-handling preacher Bill Leonard invited to speak to his classes at Wake Forest University. And for the record, I have been known to handle snakes, but only those of the non-venomous variety. Anyway... one of the students asked the preacher if he had ever been bitten by a snake. “Many times,” he said. “What did you do?” the student asked. “Well,” said the preacher, “If my faith was strong that day, I prayed. If it was not, I dialed 911.”

It seems like a wise way to proceed, if you feel like you must handle poisonous snakes, but it also seems like hedging your bets, trusting in God but covering all the bases just in case.

I say all of this not just because there is so much talk in the public arena about trust in God, but because this issue of trust lies at the heart of our faith and it is the focus of today's reading from 1 Samuel. The nation of ancient Israel begins with God's covenant with Abram. It is further developed by God's deliverance of the people from bondage in Egypt and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. The people then live for generations in what is called a theocracy where there are human interpreters of divine intent - judges and prophets - but God is the head of state, the one in charge, the one in whom the people place their trust.

It never works perfectly. There is a cycle of behavior which repeats itself over and over again wherein the people are at first faithful and thus experience peace and wholeness, but then are disloyal and thus suffer the consequences of their betrayal until they repent, receive forgiveness and return to God. Thus, they return to faithful living for a time until they prove disloyal again and the cycle repeats itself. It's a pattern many of us know on a personal level. We struggle with the same issues over and over again.

Anyway, as we join the story today, the people decide that they have had enough of theocracy. They want to move to monarchy. They want a king like other nations have. There is a catalyst for this move. Samuel, the appointed prophet, is getting old and his sons are corrupt. They cannot follow in his footsteps. But rather than seeking guidance elsewhere and still relying on God, the elders of Israel demand a king.

Samuel takes this demand personally, he is deeply offended, it feels like a rejection of his leadership. But God takes it more personally. "For they have not rejected you," God says to Samuel, "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." The people may say they place their trust in God, but when push comes to shove, they do not. As they complain about their condition in the wilderness, they complain about the current arrangement God has ordained and say they want something different. They want a king to keep them safe.

The demand is offensive to God because it indicates a lack of trust, but God does not refuse the demand. Rather God grants the people their

wish. “If you want a king, you can have one,” God says, “and everything that goes with that decision. You are free to make your own decision and equally free to experience the consequences.” Suffice it to say, the move from theocracy to monarchy is not a wise one.

God says the king will take the people’s sons and send them to war. He will take the people’s daughters and make them perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take their fields, animals and slaves. In short, the king will look after himself first, not the people. But even hearing this, they still say they want a king. So, they get what they ask for, thus proving the old adage to be careful what we ask for.

Now, some kings are better than others. While the first king, Saul, turns out to be a disaster and ends up taking his own life, David accomplishes much more, expanding the boundaries of the nation. But Saul doesn’t want the job, David has his flaws and the point is not that there is something wrong with wanting a bad king, but that the very idea of wanting a king is flawed. It is evidence of a lack of trust in God. For Israel to place its trust anywhere other than God is problematic. The monarchy will not last. The nation will fall. The writing is on the wall.

So, what does all of this have to say to us? At the very least, there is an invitation to ask the question as to where we place our deepest trust, not necessarily as a nation, that is difficult to assess, but as individuals. It is one thing to say, “In God we trust.” It is quite another thing to do so. If we want to go our own way, God will allow us to, but if we choose to place our trust in God, our lives are immeasurably richer. The question is – how do we know we are placing our trust in God?

I would say again that trusting in God does not mean we cannot do anything to help ourselves. Planning for our financial future, defending our nation with military resources and seeking the best medical care just makes sense. God does not demand blind trust nor does God desire laziness. In fact, God works through our best efforts.

I think of the old joke about a man stranded on a deserted island who prays for deliverance. Multiple sources of help arrive in the form of a boat, a plane and helicopter, but the man insists he is waiting for God’s help which never comes in the way he expects. Years later, when

he meets his Maker and complains about this “unanswered” prayer, God says, “I sent a boat, a plane and a helicopter. You refused to accept my help!” So it often goes for us. God works through many ordinary means. Seeking ordinary help does not preclude trusting in God.

We also need to be clear about what trust in God offers which is the assurance that we will never be separated from the love of God. We have a tendency to think that if we trust in God as we should, things will go our way – our loved one will get well, we will get the job, whatever need we have will be met. The corollary of this theology is that if our loved one does not get well, we do not get the job, things do not go our way, our faith has not been strong enough.

In the dominant narrative of the Hebrew Bible, things seem to work this way. When the people are faithful, they are blessed in tangible ways. When they are not, as when they demand a king, they are not blessed. But there are counter narratives such as the book of Job and many of the psalms wherein good people who place their trust in God suffer. This is certainly the case for Jesus who suffers and dies on a cross and it is the case for many who follow him and suffer persecution.

So, it is simply not the case that those who place their trust in God always experience good things in this life, which begs a question as to what difference trust makes. It is reasonable question, but it has an answer – the benefit of trusting in God is trusting in God, living in such intimate fellowship with our Creator that we realize there is nothing in this life, not even death itself, that can separate us from God.

Paul says that though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory. When the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. The benefit of placing our trust in God is placing our trust in God and all that this trust implies.

I think of the story about a farmer who is talking to the young man dating his daughter. “Young man,” he says, “Whoever marries my daughter will get a prize.” “Really?” says the young man, “What will that be?” The prize for marrying his daughter is marrying his daughter. The prize for living in intimate trust with God is living in intimate trust

with God, realizing that no matter what else we experience in life, as long as we experience God, we will be alright.

But this still leaves the question of how we know we are placing our trust in God. Such trust does not preclude our best efforts nor does it guarantee specific benefits in this life, but how do we know?

There is no easy answer, but perhaps we can get at this question by asking whether there are things we do or believe in without having all the details worked out on our own. Of course, we want to do our best, but once we have and there is still much unknown, do we still trust in God. As the book of Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1).” That is trust.

So, if we really trust in God, we are at peace the evening before surgery, not because we know the procedure will go well, though we pray it will, but because we know we will be with God no matter what. We are at peace about the place of the church in this time of rapid change, not because we know the future of the church or what we should be doing to shape that future, but because we trust that the same God who has sustained the church to this day will sustain it in the future. We are at peace about the land in which we live not because our weaponry is the finest or we like everything that is happening at any given time, but because we trust that the same God who has worked through all the ups and downs of human experience will continue to work through our ups and downs. In short, we are at peace not because of anything we can do, but because of who God is and because we place our trust in God.

Late 14th century anchoress Julian of Norwich suffered much in the way of illness and isolation, but even in suffering she deepened her trust in God. “It seems to me,” she said, “that this pain is something for a time, for it purges us and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy; for the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will for all who will be saved. He comforts readily and sweetly with his words, and says: But all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well (*Showings*, p. 149).” That is how we know we have placed our deepest trust in God – if we can say that all will be well no matter what we experience in this life.