

“(Surprising) Insight and Encouragement”

1 Samuel 8:4–11, 16–20

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It has been common for people in Christian churches to view the Old Testament with a measure of disdain, as being fundamentally inferior to the New Testament. The language of “old” and “new” alone can imply as much, and there is a good bit of violence in the Hebrew canon. There are quite a few messy tales, the stories often seem far removed from us, if not irrelevant, and even God seems different. As good church folk often say, the Old Testament God is about law and judgment while the New Testament God is about grace and love.

I would readily acknowledge the greater distance in time and culture between us and the narratives of the Hebrew canon. The stories can be violent and messy, but then, so can human experience. There is value in the honesty of these narratives that reflect the human condition, and because of this reality, the stories can be quite relevant, indeed, shockingly relevant at times. Most of all, the God of the Old Testament is the same God we meet in the New Testament.

In both testaments, what we have is not a download of God’s character as is but a Spirit-inspired human discernment of who God is, and this discernment is ever in-process. Furthermore, every covenant in the Hebrew canon is a covenant of grace. God does something for the people before anything is ever asked of them, and even God’s wrath is not simply angry judgment but a last-ditch effort to redeem the people.

So, these texts are not as far removed from us as we think, and the God we find in them is the God we know in Christ. In texts like our reading from 1 Samuel 8, we find insight and encouragement. Perhaps this is surprising to us, but it should not be.

So, what is happening in this story? Samuel has replaced Eli as priest and interpreter of the divine intent for the people because Eli allowed his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, to steal temple offerings and

assault the women who served at the temple. Samuel serves faithfully but doesn't seem to learn from Eli's experience. When he grows old, as people do, even back then, his sons, who are in line to succeed him, pursue their own interests, take bribes, and pervert justice. They may not be as bad as Eli's sons, but they are bad.

We don't know why. Scripture provides no clues. We don't know that Samuel has been a poor father, though clergy types have been known to be so consumed by sacred things that our families have suffered neglect. But there is no formula for raising children. They are not machines. We don't even want to control their lives or at least shouldn't.

All we know is that Joel and Abijah are not worthy to be leaders. Character matters and they don't have any. So, the people want different leadership, but rather than asking Samuel to find another priest through whom God can give direct counsel, they ask him to appoint a king to govern them, like other nations have. This may seem like a reasonable request, but it is not.

God has asked the people to trust in God for guidance and protection, but they say they prefer a human leader like other nations. God allows this but isn't happy about it. God has Samuel tell them a king will not be all they expect, but their minds are made up, they think they know better, and soon Saul will become king.

It is a story set in a very different time and culture. We might think of the Star Wars intro, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." This story is set in another world, thousands of years ago. The land is far away, it might as well be another galaxy. And the system of government, a central piece of the story, is different from ours. They are moving from a theocracy to an autocracy, from God being in charge through a priest to one person being in charge. We live in a democracy or democratic republic where the people are in charge.

Yet, while there are many differences, there is a great deal that seems familiar here, and the God who is involved is the God we know.

For one thing, the people in this story are very much like us. They are fickle in their loyalty and trust, very demanding of their leaders, and obstinate in their opinions. They think they know more than they do, a

king will make them safe and secure, a king will look after their needs. God has Samuel tell them a king will always be interested in himself. A king will take their resources, use their children, and if they choose to have a king, they will have to rely on that king. God will no longer hear their cry and bail them out of trouble.

It is a clear word of warning, but the people refuse to hear it. They demand a king, and so they get a king, and all that comes with him. They are so driven by fear and the search for a false sense of security that they cannot hear a word of assurance from the one true source of genuine security. Changing the system of government won't guarantee a better life, kings can be just as corrupt as priests' sons, but don't confuse them with the facts, they have gone full Quixote, they have the truth!

This doesn't seem like a distant tale; these people are like us. We are fickle, we demand a lot of our leaders, and we are obstinate in our opinions. If life isn't everything we want it to be, we want someone to blame. Each generation wants to do better than the previous, and if we don't, something is wrong. Set aside what is going on in the world, like multiple wars and the aftereffects of a pandemic; set aside the fact that we are doing better than anyone else in the world; and set aside the false premise that every generation must do better; we want what we want!

Furthermore, we are still driven by fear – fear of the other, fear of change, fear of economic collapse; and fear is a natural human emotion that leads to a search for security, often in the form of a different kind of leader, if not a king, a strongman. But for the faithful, true security can only be found in God. Leaders come and go, governments come and go, nations come and go, but the word of the Lord endures forever. Can we hear this sacred truth, or will we refuse to like the ancient Israelites?

The people in this story are like us, and the leaders are like contemporary leaders. Some are good, some are not so good, and some are downright corrupt! For every step forward the nation takes, it takes a step back. It doesn't matter if judges, priests, or kings lead, there is progress and regress, and most leaders are more interested in themselves than the people they serve. Samuel is not like this, but the kings who follow him will be, and in truth, the people get the leaders they deserve.

Is this not the case for us? We can complain about leadership, but we only have the right to do so if we vote. Even then, we choose our leaders, and they tend to reflect our values. Not all leaders are self-serving. It is unfair to lump together any category of people. There are good people in public life. But many leaders today are not public servants, in any sense of the term, and the truth is who would want to be a leader in this contentious time? Yet is this time that different from any other? The biblical story gives us perspective herein.

But what does God look like here? God longs for loyalty. God doesn't want a judge or a king. So, there will be consequences to the people's lack of trust. When their king fails them and they call for help, God will not hear them. They will be abandoned to the consequences of their own decisions. And if the text is assembled during or just after the exile, as many scholars believe, there is an element of dramatic irony here. The editor knows this is true in the boldest terms. A lack of faithfulness will lead to the people being taken into exile.

Yet God does not immediately punish the people, nor does God abandon them. God goes from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C. First judges, then priests, then kings... In his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Tony Cartledge says the most amazing thing about this story is the grace, flexibility, and generosity of God. These things are here in abundance, as they are present in the Jesus story, and in our lives. Grace, flexibility, and generosity. God is like a wise parent who gives children the freedom to make their own choices and learn from them. God may seem overindulgent at times, but love is chosen, and thus freedom is involved, even if this brings hardship. In the end, there is no other way to learn.

I remember teaching a high school Sunday School class when I was on a college mission trip. One of the regular teachers asked what mistakes and pitfalls we might help the students avoid. I suggested a few, but then added, "We each have to make our own decisions and learn from our own mistakes. There is no such thing as a secondhand faith."

This is what God gives us, room to make mistakes and grace for every single one. This is the God of ancient Israel, the God who was in Christ, the God who is with us now in Spirit.