

DTR: God & Politics

1 Samuel 8, 11:14-15 (*The Voice*)

Today, we take a dive into a crucial moment of leadership transition in Israel's history. This sermon is primarily a history lesson – so if you like biblical history, you're in luck. If not, bear with me. I'll talk a little bit about politics too, so that might perk you up...or perturb you! But regardless my hope is that we'll learn something about God and ourselves in the process.

So let's dive in: Up until this point in 1 Samuel, the people had, by and large, governed themselves. They weren't completely on their own. They had people like Samuel who served in a kind of "priestly judge" role. These judges were more like tribal or local leaders or sorts...they were there to remind the people of God's voice and commandments and to arbitrate any disputes among people. So really, no "central" government existed.

The judges, such as Samuel, would step forward and lead in times of crises, but not have too much leadership beyond that. The idea being, of course, that God is the leader of the people. And any rules

that people followed were really rules given by God...like the 10 Commandments.

The temple held a key place in society, which is why priests were esteemed. If you recall, Samuel was dropped off at the temple by his mom when he was really young and the priest Eli raised him. When Samuel first heard his call to serve the Lord, God's message to him was that he needed to tell Eli that Eli's term was up...mainly because his sons were corrupt. This is important because essentially what happened to Eli, happened to Samuel. History has a way of repeating itself, doesn't it? You see, Samuel was planning on his sons following in his footsteps as he retired, but his sons "took bribes and perverted justice." In other words, they weren't fit to be leaders, they hadn't earned the people's trust, and the elders of Israel weren't having it.

So though things had been ruled one way for generations, it was the people who called for a change – not their leader, not God. This is important, as I think it shows us a political lesson in the midst of this

history lesson. The voice of the people has power...and always has. God doesn't ignore our voices, God listens to our voices, for better or worse.

Now – time out on the history lesson for a minute – for a brief word about politics. Because I know the word makes some of us squirm. The root of the word politics is *polis*, which means “city” or “community” and the related word *polītēs* means “citizen.” Thus, politics is merely a word that describes the systems and ways that we govern, care for and relate to citizens, cities, and communities.

In my reading of Scripture, God deeply cares about people. So it logically follows that if God cares about people, God certainly cares about politics...about how we care for one another, about who we follow and what ethics we choose to embrace through our policies. As time has gone on, politics has become more and more about “*the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power.*”¹ And actually, as our history lesson from 1 Samuel continues, we'll see that debate and conflict has always been a part of politics and God hasn't shied away from that!

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>
(accessed on June 10, 2018)

So back to the story. The elders of Israel tell Samuel that there ain't no way his sons are going to keep leading them. Instead, they say, very bluntly: “*You are old. Your sons are corrupt. Other nations have a king, we want one too.*” I guess even back then, politics was not particularly polite. In my head, I hear this cry in the whine of a temperamental two-year old: “*But everyone else has a king, why can't we!?*”

Well, this request makes Samuel upset. As one with a priestly/prophetic mindset, we could imagine that he's upset because really the people should be looking to their one true King, God, to lead them, not to an earthly king. So Samuel is grieved spiritually for his people. What is probably also true, if not moreso, is that his ego is bruised. He's being told he's ineffective and his sons are too. Essentially, establishing a monarchy would end his name and lineage and take all power away from him. As much as he was supposed to be about pointing the people to the power of God, and not to himself, I have yet to meet any human leader who does not have some ego involved in their leadership. Myself included.

So it's not hard to imagine that Samuel is a bit hurt and confused about what the people have said. But he is a priest, so he turns to the Lord in prayer. And the Lord essentially says, "*Listen to the people. If they want a king, give them a king. It's not about you. It's me they are rejecting, not you. They've been rejecting me as their Lord from day one. Just listen to what they want. Tell them all the risks of what they are asking for, but then if they still want one, a king they shall have.*"

I find this fascinating! You can tell God cares about their governing and wishes they were making a different choice, but really, this points to a God who is confident in who God is, without having to "control" the people or force their will. God allows people to have the power of choice: which by extension means...our voice and our choice matters. God is not just going to magically "intervene from on high."

So before the people make their choice, Samuel lays out all the fine print (kind of like those prescription drug commercials where all the side effects are listed really quickly at the end). Samuel

gives them all the warnings and risks they should be aware of before asking for a king. Samuel describes the king as a taker: 'he will take your sons' (8:11), 'he will take your daughters' (8:13), 'he will take the best of your fields' (8:14), 'he will take one-tenth of your grain' (8:15), 'he will take your male and female slaves' (8:16a), 'he will take the best of your cattle and donkeys' (8:16b), 'he will take one-tenth of your flocks' (8:17).²

As one biblical historian notes, "At first the king's "taking" is perhaps to build military infrastructure. Sons are taken to be charioteers and soldiers, to be commanders of troops, to raise food for the army, to make implements of war. Soon, however, the taking exceeds the bounds of war-readiness. Daughters are taken as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. The best of the grain, wine, and olive oil is taken [from the people] for the king's court officials. The labor of humans and animals are taken to do the king's work. Until, in the end, 'you shall be his slaves' (8:17)."³ Ironically, these are the same Israelites, the same people who God led *out* of slavery and bondage to freedom and ultimately now, they're asking for a leader

² Robert Williamson, Jr., "The Politics of Military Consumerism – 1 Samuel 8:4-20" *Political Theology* (1 June 2015), accessed on June 10, 2018 at

<https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-military-consumerism-1-samuel-84-20/>.

³ Williamson, *ibid*.

that will enslave them once again. But they can't see that far ahead...they only see what they want in the immediate future. They ignore the possible long-term consequences because of their short-term desires. Which is so easy to do, isn't it? Many of us struggle to learn the consequences of this "instant gratification" thinking.

And yet, even with the warnings of what a king will bring...the people still demand a king. And they aren't afraid to say *why* they want a king. It's not to help them follow God more closely. It's because other nations have kings and they want to "keep up with the Jones'" (so to speak) *and* they want "the king to go out and fight their battles for them!" (v20).

The root of this demand is fear. Because they are afraid, even though there is no explicit danger looming for them at this time, they want a mighty king to magically take away their fear. They are looking for an easy solution in their complex world. When there were judges around locally, by and large the people had to arbitrate their own disputes and figure things out on their own...work together. And, as a last resort, go to the judge for help. With a king, they are imagining a ruling coming down from "on high" – someone

doing their hard work for them. Making decisions and calling the shots so they don't have to.

We can begin to see that this was not just a crucial moment of transition for Israel's leadership model, it was also a crucial moment that revealed their priorities: superiority over and above spirituality, fear over and above faith.

Samuel repeats the people's plea to God, as if God didn't already hear it or know it, and God says again to Samuel, "give them a king." And of course, we know the story from here...Saul is appointed king.

You can almost hear Samuel saying (under his breath), "*Be careful what you wish for...*" and God saying, "*Let them wish...they already aren't following my ways anyway...let them try their way...*"

Oh, how often we want to do things *our* way. (sigh) Usually because whatever "our" way is is going to fix all the problems of the "current" way. This is what politics has turned in to today. This vast pendulum swinging from one extreme to the next. Everyone vying for *their* way of solving *the* problem. The only problem is...we fail to recognize that whatever "our problem" is – isn't the *only* problem. Politics becomes very

narrow when we are only vying for our own interests. On the flip side, politics works to empower the people when we lift up the voices of people who have problems that are vastly different than our own. This is hard to do. To weigh our self-interest alongside the interests of others. But it's what we're called to do as people of faith.

In Matthew 23, in Jesus' long list of woes against the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matthew 23:13-36), he rebukes them for neglecting "*the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness*" (v.23). Jesus was essentially quoting Micah 6:8 in which the prophet says that what the Lord requires of us is to "*do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*"⁴

You see God begins to use the voice of the prophets to keep the power and self-interest of the kings "in check." The prophet Isaiah says, "*Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.*" (Isaiah 1:17) The prophet Jeremiah says, "*This is what the Lord says: Do what is right and*

just. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place." (Jeremiah 22:3)

What we see in these passages (and in hundreds of others in the prophetic books of the Old Testament) is not just a clear concern for vulnerable populations, but also that these concerns are naming large scale, systemic issues that are not possible to address by way of mission trips, church service projects, or one-on-one benevolence.⁵ These concerns are related to policies and systems, which is why politics, in addition to helping others on our own, matters. It's not one or the other, it's both/and.

The voices of the prophets remind us that God can and will continue to speak in and through whatever system of governance we choose. No matter the election or the party affiliation, God will not abandon us. We even see, through Israel's example, that God can work in and through *anyone*.

⁴ Corey Fields, "Yes, the Bible teaches social justice" *Baptist News Global* (6 June 2018), accessed on June 10, 2018 at https://baptistnews.com/article/yes-the-bible-teaches-social-justice/?utm_source=BNG+Headlines&utm_campaign=b4ad7650bb-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_06_05_11_48_COPY_01&utm

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⁵Fields, *ibid*.

You see the kings of Israel, beginning with Saul, of course, lead things downhill for Israel, big time. The king's choices nearly destroy Israel altogether...there are some definite close calls. But then things swing up for the kings too...it's an ebb and flow.

However, God worked in and through even Israel's deeply flawed monarchy. After all, who turns out to be not just Israel, but also the *whole world's* King? Jesus of Nazareth...a great, great, great grandson of one of Israel's kings, David.⁶ And Jesus, turned kingship on its head. Making it about humility and servanthood, not hubris and superiority.

You could say Jesus coming out of the lineage of the Israelite monarchy is a shining example of what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote in Romans 8:28, "*In all things God works for the good of those who love him.*" There's an old catechism of belief in the Reformed Christian Church that references this verse and says, "*the Lord will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world.*"⁷

But this affirms the perspective that we often think about...that is, that "adversity" consists of things that are imposed on us from outside of ourselves. "God's people generally think of the trouble in which God works through for our good as things like hunger, cancer, unemployment and terrorism. However, 1 Samuel 8 reminds that we, God's people, sometimes create our own adversity."⁸ Like the Israelites, we too sometimes make disastrous choices. And we are left to live in the consequences, like Israel. But God doesn't leave us there alone. God is there to call us to see that no choice is beyond redeeming. If *we* raise *our* voices, God *will* raise hope.

From priestly judges to kings and the politics in between, what was true then is true now: how we govern ourselves as a society reveals a lot about whether or not God's love governs our lives as individuals...and...whether or not we believe God can work in ways "beyond what we can ask or imagine," as Paul writes in Ephesians (3:20).

You know, my title today is *DTR: God and Politics*. If you haven't dated recently, you may not know

⁶ Doug Bratt, "1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15" *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (4 June 2018), accessed on June 10, 2018 at <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/>.

⁷ Bratt, *ibid.*
⁸ Bratt, *ibid.*

what DTR means. It stands for “Define the Relationship.” If a couple is going to have a DTR conversation they’re going to be talking about whether or not they are just casually dating or whether this is an exclusive/serious relationship. Or, as some of you might have said in your dating days, this was the conversation about whether or not you are officially courting or “going together.”

As people of faith we have struggled to have the DTR conversation about God and Politics. In part because we avoid the conversation but also because we tend to want to pin God down on one side or the other. Which pits us against each other. But the truth is God can and will work in and through *all* sides, and *all* people. But we have to believe that to be true. And we have to continue to lend our voices to be the voices that God works through. The relationship between God and politics is inseparable in my mind. Because the relationship between God and people is inseparable.

Now, because we’re Baptists I do need to state that we, as Baptists, believe strongly in the separation of church and state. But that doesn’t mean that God isn’t at work in both the “church” and the

“state.” And where God is at work, we are to be at work too!

And so because the relationship between God and people is inseparable whenever our policies start to reflect a separation from this...an ideology where all people are not seen as beloved and equally loved by God...then we know our voices are needed even more in politics. The systems we have to work with are broken. They always will be because they are human, and humans are flawed. But broken systems doesn’t mean giving up. It means turning toward God with even more prayer and fervor and passion than before. The more unrest we see and feel in our politics, the more we need to channel the peace and justice of God in our own lives and work.

Remember, even though the monarchy system in Israel was corrupt and going downhill, God didn’t just get rid of the kings. God worked in and through the kings...and the people’s voices...and the prophets...to call the kings to account. When we don’t hear the ethic of love reflected in our leaders or policies, then it becomes our job to empower ourselves and those around us to be bold in our prophetic proclamation of God’s love and justice for all.

Simply put: Our call as followers of God is to also be followers of politics. To care about the policies that are protecting or harming God's people. To either call for different leadership when we see that need (as Israel's elders did), or when our leaders aren't leading as we feel God would want, then lend our voices as prophetic witness.

It's interesting isn't it...that God tells Samuel to respect what the people wanted...a king. God doesn't disparage the people's choice...God tells Samuel to go with it. In our modern-day language God might say to us, whoever you, the people have elected, that is your leader. Whether you are grieved or elated, use your voice and your life to show respect, not just to your leaders, but to all people.

Sometimes it can be hard to see and believe as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. did, that "the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice." But through the prophets, through Christ, and ultimately through our own words and actions – we must ensure that it does. God has given us that ultimate prophetic vision in Christ and we are now the body and voice of Christ living that out today.

So my challenge for you this week is this: For this moment in time in our history and politics, imagine yourself as Samuel. What do you hear the people saying? I really want you to listen for the voices of others. Try to not think about the way you would do things, but really listen to what others are saying...to all the perspectives and voices around you. Listen to them and then, take them to the Lord in prayer. And as you pray, listen for the voice of God. What might God be calling you to do? Or how might God be calling you to respond? And then – think about this: How are you acting to live out what God is telling you?

As we see with Samuel, and will see with the prophets...how we respond matters. Even the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, came through the lineage of the political systems of his day...only to challenge those systems as he grew up. Where do you see evidence of the ethic of God's love and mercy in our politics today and how can you lift that up and celebrate it...and...where do you see need for reform?

Because God is the God of everything and everyone – I believe God is alive and at work in and through our politics. Are you?

Amen.