

Nearly twenty years ago, when I first started down the road to ordained ministry, I thought that I at least had some idea what I was getting into. I had grown up in a pastor's family, I knew quite a bit about what it looked like, the ups and the downs. I understood that there would be perks and that there would be trials. What I don't think I entirely appreciated is that I would be joining up with this church thing in a time when things are changing so fast. Growing up, I felt like the church was a given. Most people I knew went to a church, even if they didn't go to my church, I don't think I knew an honest to goodness atheist until I was in college. But wheels were in motion: nominal Christians were ascendant, which means people who would tell you they were Christians, but spent very little time trying to actually follow Jesus. People with this approach inevitably approach religion with a sense of duty and are quite pleased to do the bare minimum when it comes to working on a relationship with God. They tend to look at their pastor and their church as the primary reflection of their spiritual state. If the church looks good and does the "right" things, then they must be okay with God, but that frankly is idolatry. A generation or two of that and you "suddenly" (sorry for all the air quotes) get a bunch of people coming up who think that this whole church thing is just not even worth the lip service anymore.

Couple that with a steady cultural change that rejects authority and mistrusts institutions in general and bam, this church thing doesn't work the way it used to and the only thing we can think to do about it is to entertain people enough to try and survive. There are a lot of things I could talk about with regard to the readings from Samuel this morning, but I'm going to focus on the cultural shift that is happening in Israel, because I think we are in the same situation on a lot of levels right now, politically yes, but more importantly in the church. Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. Samuel was called by God at a young age to serve as a priest, and eventually, because of his connection to God, Samuel rose to be the sort of person that Israel needed to keep them on the right path. But all around people were forgetting God, they were "doing what was right in their own eyes." Samuel, as he got older, tried to appoint his sons to be judges as well, but they weren't cutting it and Samuel just couldn't keep up, so the people came and demanded a King. Because all the cool countries had them.

Kings were shiny things that could lead them into battle and really help them kick some butt. Kings seemed to be the way that all of their enemies were able to keep causing them so many headaches. The logic is that, if you do what works for others, you will have similar results. The church does this too, we adopt business models and public relations strategies. Most of the "leader" training we get as clergy would be totally transferrable to being a business owner or a CEO. Likewise, church growth strategies are mostly just a conglomeration of secular ideas with a bit of a spiritual gloss over top of them. And you know what? Kings can do all of that stuff, they can win battles and make you strong like all the others. Just like marketing strategies and sales techniques can help your church grow, but it comes at a cost. The cost shows up when you consider what the alternative actually is: God's love and grace. I know it's hard to trust God when the Amorites are massing at your border. It's hard to believe that God would be involved in something that wasn't robustly successful. It challenges our faith if we feel like others are more blessed and successful than we are.

This is why I believe that we are in an era that is similar to what is described here in Samuel. For some time the model of priest, judge, in other words, authority figure, has worked pretty well, but as the culture has changed, people are grumbling for something else. Our faith is challenged by what we perceive as a waning of our influence and a loss of our place at the bright shiny center of the world. What they want is essentially a king, but not really, they want a celebrity champion, someone to fight their battles and be their totem symbol. It's what we want in our leaders, but it's not good for us, just as

a king was not good for Israel, at least not as good as what God intended for them. God tells Samuel, "It's not you they have rejected, but me." From that moment on, Samuel is no longer a priest/judge he is a prophet, even though he anoints kings, he always knows that the kings are going to fail. Even though he tells the people what is right, he does so with a sense that they will not listen, because they won't. People cannot naturally accept God's sovereignty and grace, mostly they would prefer to have control and authority, even as they rail against those who hold control and authority. Our natural state is a struggle for power, and we cannot envision how God, the ultimate power, exercises that power by giving it away. Kings make more sense.

So here's what I've learned in 15 years of ministry, what I always thought I was called to do was be a priest, an authority trained to think about God's ways and teach people about the Word of the Lord. I suppose that is what I do for a living, but there is something that is sort of emerging here and it is that I also need to become a prophet. Samuel did not stop being a priest or even really a judge when he became a prophet, he simply gave up the delusion that the people were going to ever actually get what God was telling them. He also gave up the delusion that his importance had that much to do with him. He was free to be a prophet when he stopped worrying about projecting the façade that people wanted from him. Hopefully you know I'm not perfect already. Hopefully none of you are out there mistaking me for the example of what righteousness looks like. Hopefully none of you are thinking that I'm the great leader or king that's going to lead you into battle and make all your troubles go away.

As Bob Dylan said, "It ain't me babe." I'm the guy who gets bummed out when people don't seem to care about the Kingdom of Heaven, or when what Jesus said doesn't seem interesting enough to warrant their attention. I'm the guy who gets tempted to at least try to give people what they want, even when I know it's just not the thing they need. I'm the guy who sometimes feels like I'm a martyr because I don't get regular weekends or because I can't stay out late on a Saturday night (yes I can be that petty). I'm the guy who sometimes has to really bite my tongue so I don't use the bad words up here. The thing is though, I know, after 15 years that I have nothing to give you but Jesus. I don't have hope of a glorious kingdom of Israel, I only have a man who refused to play into that delusion so strenuously that those who needed a king had him crucified by a despot. I can't guarantee you success, in fact most of the time I will point at the cross and remind you how tough that can be to carry. I don't have any scheme or plan to make this place into a hip, booming place where everything always goes right. All I have is the Word of God and how it weaves its way into my own messy story. I am a guy who spends a good amount of time every week trying to get himself out of the way of what God wants to say to you. I hope sometimes it gets to you.