



Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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Poland, Ohio 44514  
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Second Sunday after Pentecost  
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1 Samuel 8:4-22

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### Of Kings and Prophets

We are about to embark on yet another election year and if you are like me you are sighing because it seems we just finished with all of that. Once again the people of this land will elect a new “king”. I say king and not president because that is really what we want, isn’t it? We want that one single authority whose identity encompasses all of our hopes, our dreams, our values and aspirations, and our best virtues. And we want that one person to be merciful, benevolent, and wise; a visionary who is intelligent and educated, has charisma and a good sense of humor. In short, once again we will be searching for the impossible. But we continue to do this because we have a choice. Just like we have a choice of which refrigerator or automobile to purchase, we have a choice in who our next leader will be. And we want to get the best; the best bang for our buck.

Israel thought they deserved the best. They deserved to be like the other nations. At the time we read about in our lesson today Samuel the prophet is an old man. He has put his sons in charge of Israel under the system of judges that worked really well for more than 400 years. Changing the system after that long involves a real upheaval, a real change or paradigm shift. But Israel thought they were behind the 8 ball compared to the other nations who all had kings. The judges, who just happened to be all of Samuel’s sons, had proven to be corrupt. It was time for a change. There were twelve tribes, all with sometimes conflicting agendas and the people believed a king would bring them together in unity. Whether these reasons were legitimate or not, the people used them to rationalize getting what they wanted.

Sometimes nations and corporations and communities and even churches are blind to their real problem. They think making a change will solve all their problems and make everything better. Israel was blind to their real problem too. It wasn’t a king that they needed, it was faith in God. If the judges

had become corrupt, the people had become unfaithful. They had become disobedient to God and their desire to put a human king in the place of God was the supreme example of their disobedience. God knew this. God knew they had rejected him once again and turned to their own ways.

Wise old Samuel tried to dissuade them of this idea. Following the instructions of God he tells them that Israel is unique among nations. Israel is unique because they have God to lead them and they do not need a king. This is what a king will do, he told them, “he will conscribe your sons into the army and make them serve him. He will make some commanders and some soldiers and some of you will have to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some will have to work in the munitions factory. Your daughters will also have to serve the king as perfumers and cooks and bakers. A king will take the best of what you have; the first 10% or even more; the firstfruits of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and your grain and your cattle and donkeys and sheep and goats. Isn't this the part that is supposed to be given to God? The King won't care. And in the end you will become his slaves. And in that day you will cry out to God but God will not hear your cries.” The demands of a king are expensive. They will use their power and authority to not only control the you but to abuse and enslave you.

God lets the people have their king. The people choose Saul who is rich and handsome. We seem to like rich and handsome in our leaders. He is anointed king by Samuel, but in secret. In time all that Samuel told the people about kings will come to pass.

Saul was psychologically disturbed. He blatantly disobeyed God. He turned on his best warrior, David. So insecure and full of jealousy was Saul that he consulted a witch for advice. Saul had boundary issues and he takes upon himself Samuel's role, the role of the priests, and offers sacrifices. It becomes apparent finally that Saul never had the qualities to be king. And God repents of making Saul king. Maybe the people did too.

By the time we meet Solomon, all of Samuel's predictions come true. And he was only the third king of Israel. Solomon was an amazing king. His court was a place of world wide wisdom and learning. Solomon was wise, but he was guilty of idolotry; his heart turned toward wealth and power. The people are heavily taxed to pay for his many extravagances such as 700 wives and 300 concubines (how did he keep up?), many of whom worshipped foreign Gods and turned his heart toward those Gods. Solomon knew the Biblical injunction against this but thought it didn't apply to him.

Then there was Herod the Great, king at the birth of Jesus. He was a madman who murdered his own family. As evil as any Hitler, greedy and power hungry, Herod had no regard for other persons. He had a body guard of 2000, so fearful

was he of his life. Then he spent lavish sums on building projects so that his name would not be forgotten and his popularity would be boosted among the people. Well, we haven't forgotten the name of Herod the Great, slaughterer of the innocents.

Although there were some good kings in Israel, there is no end to the list of despotic king throughout their history, one worst than the next. Most were just as Samuel had predicted.

What about prophets? Prophets are a different type of leader. Prophets are called by God and they answer that call, often reluctantly and at great personal expense. Prophets are visionaries. They hold forth a vision for the people which is not a human vision, but God's vision. Look at Samuel who thought he was hearing voices as a child. It was God calling him and Samuel was obedient to God. The first thing we hear in our reading today that Samuel did when the people came to him wanting a king was to pray. Samuel was a man of prayer and we see that quality in all of the prophets. Samuel grieved over Saul and over his people because that is what prophets do; they grieve over their people.

Then there was Amos, a simple sheep farmer and sycamore tender, not the kind of guy who had the right credentials that the people should have called him, yet God did. He brought the difficult message that justice is more important than empty rituals and sacrifices. Or there was Micah who spoke out against dishonesty and corruption. Think about Jonah who ran from his call and then reluctantly went where he didn't want to go to preach God's word to a people who didn't want to hear it, and yet they listened to him. The prophet Jeremiah was called by God to warn people of their sin and impending disaster when others were consoling them with words of peace. It wasn't an easy call to answer and he paid with a life marked by persecution. The prophet Baalam was hired by the king to curse the people and he could not do it because only words of blessing came from his mouth. There was Isaiah who brought a word of hope to a hopeless nation, and Ezekiel whose call from God was to bring new life in the valley where all seemed dead, and Daniel who spoke truth to power. Prophets serve the people, not the other way around.

There have been many modern day prophets like Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Pope Frances. Prophets are chosen by God to speak the word of God to the people of God, even when it might not be the word they want to hear. Kings are chosen by the people in the image of the people to satisfy the desires of the people. Pride chooses pride. Power chooses power. Greed chooses greed. Dishonesty chooses

If the people of Israel had just listened to God they would have ended up in a far better place. But, like most of us, they didn't. They wanted what they wanted

and they got it. The only problem is that when we get the requests we clamor for, requests of our desire, not Gods, we also get leanness and restlessness in our souls. Do you want a king or do you want a prophet?

It is not just that our leaders fail us, although they may, but it is also that we, the people have chosen poorly. We have put our egos over the desires of God and we, like the Israelites, have tried to put a human being in the place of God. We do it all the time in government but in the church we have a different code. In the church we are supposed to let God do the choosing. And when we don't we are equally complicit in the behavior of our leaders. We are equally responsible. So when we behave like the Israelites we have not only the king to blame but also ourselves.

It isn't easy being a leader, whether king or prophet. Our leaders are human and they make mistakes. I imagine that those who lived after the reign of Saul may have looked back and demonized him and I imagine that maybe some of them felt regret. We can demonize our leaders or we can forgive them when they fall. And we can hang on to our regrets or we can forgive ourselves. Sometimes forgiveness comes hard. We are not all ready for forgiveness at the same time. Some wounds are slower to heal. I just finished reading "The Secret Life of Bees" by Sue Monk Kidd and in that story Lily says, "People in general would rather die than forgive. It's *that* hard. If god said in plain language, 'I'm giving you a choice, forgive or die,' a lot of people would go ahead and order their coffin." But resentments not forgiven will eat away at us. A wise leader once told me that resentment is like a poison that I make for you and then drink myself.

Without forgiveness we can't move forward to a place where we can embrace what God wants for us. We stay stuck. We can't look forward with hope to a new day when God's grace will surprise us with new and better alternatives. We can't trust ourselves to make right choices in the future if we have not put the past to rest through forgiveness.

The Israelites didn't need a king as much as they needed a prophet. They didn't need a king because they were NOT like the other nations. They had God as their leader. The church is not like other bodies. We have Christ as our leader, the head of the church, the one who is both prophet and king. He is all we could ever hope for in a king and all God desires for us in a prophet. When we put our trust in human leaders rather than in him, we are always destined, like the Israelites, to failure.

Around this table where we are about to gather may our faith in Jesus Christ, our God and king be renewed. Around this table may we learn to forgive as we have been forgiven. Around this table may we be healed and reconciled. Around this table may we be united in a common purpose; to seek God's will for us in

community, as we seek to follow God's will in all of our choices. Amen.