

Sermon: "Like Everybody Else"
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1Samuel 8:4-11; 16-20

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, 7 and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 8 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. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;

16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

"Everyone else is doing it.
 Why can't I?"

"If everyone else jumped off a bridge, would you do that too?"

Do you recognize that conversation?
We've all had it with our parents first and then with our own children.
We are all subject to peer pressure.

We want to wear the right shoes.
We want to wear the right clothes.
We want to go to the right school. And so forth.

We want to fit in.
We want to be like everyone else.

This desire to be like everyone else may be the greatest when we are young, but I have found that this desire stays with us into our adult lives.

We don't want to be different in any way.
It makes us uncomfortable.

But, there's a problem with that.

CALLED TO BE HOLY

The Bible tells us that God's people are called to be different.

We are holy.
We have been set apart for a special purpose, God's purpose.

That means that people of faith do indeed follow the beat of a different drummer.

Quite often what we believe will run counter to public opinion.

And like ancient Israel we often are tempted reject this call to be holy, this call to be different.

We don't want to be different.
We want to be like everyone else.

I am reminded of a line from the musical, Fiddler on the Roof.
Tevye, a poor Jewish farmer is overwhelmed by the load of life's injustices.

He and his family struggle not only because of their poverty but also because of their faith.

So, he throws up his hands and says to God,

“I know, I know, we are the chosen people.
But, once in a while can't you choose somebody else?”

Let's be honest.
Being different from those around us can be a significant burden.
Our differences make us stand out.
Those who are different are often ostracized or even persecuted.

That's why we want to be like everyone else.
It seems safer.

And yet, as disciples of Jesus Christ we too are called to be holy.
We are called to be different.
We are called to walk to the beat of a different drummer.

This struggle with the call to be holy has been around a long time.
That's what our Old Testament lesson for today is about.

WE WANT A KING

The elders of Israel came to the prophet Samuel with an urgent request.
They said, “We need a king to govern us *like the other nations.*”

All the other nations had a king, but Israel didn't have a king.
Why? Well, because God was their king.
They were called to put their trust in God instead of some human ruler.

As we mentioned in last week's sermon, the children of Israel had ample reason to trust God.

God had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt.
God had led and cared for his people in the wilderness.

God had given His people the law.
God had brought His people safe into the Promised Land.

But, God's people had a short memory when it came to the mighty works of God.

The elders of Israel pointed out that Samuel's sons were not prophetically inclined.

(In fact, sadly, Samuel's sons were out and out scoundrels.)

The elders saw a problem looming.

They needed to fill the leadership vacuum that would exist once old Samuel died.

Israel's neighbors posed a credible military threat.

And so in this time of uncertainty they needed to make plans for the future.

Unfortunately their plans did not take into account God's plans and promises.

Instead of trusting in a God that they could not see, they wanted to put their trust in a king that they could see. The king might be imperfect, but at least he could raise an army and lead it into battle. When your country is in danger changes need to be made quickly.

And sometimes that means you have to give up some freedoms and comforts in order to be safe. Anointing a king seemed like the obvious answer. At least that's what the elders of Israel thought.

SAMUEL'S PRAYER

But, the old prophet Samuel was greatly displeased with what the elders of Israel said.

You may remember that Samuel had spent his whole life in service to God. When he was just a little boy his mother, Hannah brought him to the Temple to serve under the care of the priest, Eli.

And at that young age Samuel heard the Lord calling him in the night.

Samuel responded, "Speak, Lord for your servant is listening."

In an age when the word of the Lord was rare, Samuel heard the voice of God his whole life.

And this man of God knew in his heart that the leaders of his country were about to make a tragic mistake.

So, Samuel took his concerns to the Lord.
He prayed.

Apparently Samuel took this request for a new king as a personal defeat. What Samuel actually said is not recorded in the Bible, but I can imagine Samuel praying out of frustration something like this,

“Lord, I’ve been preaching that You are their King all these years. And now at the end of my life these people, out of fear, want to anoint a mere man to be their king. Have they not heard a word I’ve said?”

But, God said to Samuel,

“It’s not your fault.
The people haven’t rejected you.
They’ve rejected me.
They don’t trust Me to be their king.

This is nothing new.
Ever since I brought my people out of slavery from Egypt they have gone after other gods and refused my leadership.

You’re just getting rejected because you’re my representative.
Welcome to the club.”

So what will God do with these leaders who want an earthly king instead of trusting God to be their King?

God’s going to warn His people through the prophet about the dangers of anointing a king.
And if they don’t listen, God is going to punish His people by giving them exactly what they want!

THE WARNING

Samuel obeys.
He gives the people God’s solemn message.

“I’m not going to prevent you from anointing a king.
But, if you do anoint a king be prepared for what will happen.

Taxes are going up.
Your sons and daughters will be drafted to fight in the army.
Many of you will lose everything you have and become virtual slaves in your own country.

If that sounds good to you, by all means anoint a king.
But, don't come crying to the Lord when things go bad.
He's not going to listen."

To put it another way, the king will use fear of a potential foreign enemy as an excuse to amass a vast army during peacetime. He will confiscate labor and money and possessions from the people. He will use his power to create an economy based upon military spending.

This will eventually lead to the king keeping some of this massive spending for himself and for his cronies. They will live a life of luxury while the people suffer. The economy will become warped by all this military spending and the rich will get richer, while the poor will get poorer.

The Lord couldn't make it any plainer than this.
You would think after this dire prediction the elders of Israel would have said,

"Oh my goodness.
We've made a stupid mistake.
We don't need a king.

We've been redeemed from slavery.
We don't want to go back to that."

But, that's not what they said.
Instead the elders of Israel replied,

"Hey, that's a fair trade.
We'll just have to sacrifice blood and treasure in order to be safe.
In a dangerous world we have to be realistic."

A KING WORTHY OF SACRIFICE

Those crazy Israelites.

Why couldn't they trust God instead of kings and the weapons of war?
I'm sure glad we're not like that.

Oh wait.

Sadly more often than not we are like that.

We are citizens of the kingdom of God, but sometimes we tell God out of fear,

"We want to be like everybody else."

And so we are.

The question this morning is not *if* we shall give ourselves and our children in service to a king.

No, the question this morning is *which* king is worthy of our ultimate sacrifice?

Jesus once said,

"No one can serve two masters." (Matthew 6:24)

We can't stay on the fence.

We have to choose which king we will serve.

The world is still filled with false gods.

In fact, there are so many false gods that it would take all day to name them.

As I've often mentioned, John Calvin once said that men and women are practically idol factories, making things "king" that are not really King.

So, in the interest of time, let me just name a few of the more popular "gods".

There is the god called money.

There is the god called power.

There is the god called fame.

We can make these any of these false gods our "king".

It's our choice.

But, in the spirit of the prophet Samuel, I would say, "Watch out!"
All these so called "kings" can be a harsh taskmaster.
All these so called "kings" can make us into slaves.

There's only one King that deserves our support.
That King saved His people from slavery and gave them a new home.

And later that King became one of us.
That King knew what it meant to be human and weak.

That King knew what it meant to be tempted.
That King knew what it meant to suffer and die.

On the cross that King was crucified by very people he had come to save.
His body was broken for us.
His blood was shed for us.

And on the cross that King offered a word of forgiveness even to the enemies who killed him.

Now I ask you,
Which king do you want to follow?

Do you want to follow a king who creates pain and suffering?
Or do you want to follow a King who takes our pain and suffering upon himself?

Which king is worthy of our sacrifice?
The answer seems so obvious.

THE CHRISTIAN DIFFERENCE

But, like the elders of Israel, out of fear, we sometimes choose those other "kings" instead.
And because of that we suffer terribly.

The distinctive things that make us people of faith are taken away.
We become like everyone else.
We become slaves, slaves to the ways of the world and slaves to our own fear.

We are not called to be like everybody else.
We are called to be different.

A few years ago a man was visiting the Soviet Union.
He made friends with a woman who had been a Communist from birth.
And she was an avowed atheist.

As they talked she asked,

“You are a Christian, right?
How have you lived differently from me today because you are a Christian?
Did you ask God what he wanted you to do when you got out of bed this morning?
Did you spend your money differently because you believe God is real?”

The man said that it was a shattering experience.
He said,

“I realized there wasn’t any difference between this Russian atheist and myself in terms of how I lived my life. In practice I too was an atheist. I was like everyone else.”

THE SCRIBE

I read a story about a man who was a modern day Scribe.
It was his job to sit in a room each day and laboriously copy the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) by hand.

Not only did he create the Torah by hand, he also used a goose feather and painstakingly dipped the quill in the ink as he meticulously formed each letter.

School children would come and watch. Some would come to write a letter in the Torah under the strict direction of the Scribe. Many were deeply moved by the experience.

The reporter asked, “In this age of computers and word processors, why would a Jewish temple in New York City hire a scribe to write it all by hand?”

The Scribe responded that it was ridiculous to even think of doing it that way.

Copying the Torah was more than merely recording words.

It was an ancient custom that got him in touch with his faith in a special way.

It was a deeply religious experience.

It helped him understand why he was different from everyone else.

THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNION

How can we as followers of Jesus Christ understand that we are different from everyone else?

I have often suggested that we should revive the old fashioned practice of memorizing Scripture. That would be a good way to put the word in our hearts as well as our head.

It would help us understand why we are different.

But, there's another way that we emphasize that we are not like everyone else.

We take communion on a regular basis.

We refer to communion as a means of grace.

In other words, through communion we get in touch with the fact that we are saved not because of who we are and what we have done.

Instead we are saved by what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

We take this bread and cup as a physical way to remember who we are and whose we are. When we take communion we remember that God is our King.

When we take communion we remember that we are not like everybody else.

Amen.