

“Sing to the Ways of the Lord”

Psalm 138; I Samuel 8:1-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might proclaim you as sovereign and live in the ways of your Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I want to talk about some big ideas today. Far too often, we leave the big ideas to others, without recognizing how they connect with our own lives in countless ways, big and small. This story we just heard from First Samuel brings up a lot of things for us to think about. So let's start by making sure we understand what's going on. Israel had been getting along as a non-kingdom, led by prophets who also served as judges, like Samuel. The judges were there to sort out disputes, which were inevitably going to arise, even amongst the people of God. But the idea was that there was no king, because God was their ultimate ruler.

But then, as you heard, Samuel got too old to carry out those formidable duties, so he trained up his sons to take his place. (This may have been the first step in the wrong direction!) It seems Samuel's sons were not as intimate with Yahweh as he was, and they weren't interested in judging between the people using Yahweh's principles. Instead, they used their positions to their own advantage, taking bribes and perverting justice, as the story puts it.

So what happens next is not that surprising. The elders of Israel came to complain. They weren't happy with Samuel's corrupt sons running things, because

they weren't doing it fairly like Samuel had. But instead of demanding that different, more righteous people be named as judges, they had a whole new plan: it was time for a king!

What's interesting here is that suddenly the elders of Israel start to sound like tweens begging their parent for permission to do something they've already been told they have to wait till they're 16 to do. "All the other nations have kings! Why can't we have a king? We need someone to govern us, like the other nations. Please, Samuel, please?" You can almost imagine him saying, "Well, if all the other nations jumped off a bridge, would you do that too?" Israel was supposed to be special; they were supposed to be God's people, led by Yahweh alone. They were supposed to stand out among the nations, as a light and a witness. Other nations were supposed to want to be like them, not the other way around. But here they were, begging for a king, because they wanted to be governed like everybody else. It's beginning to look like corruption wasn't really the problem they were trying to solve. There was a different desire underneath. They wanted to be like other nations, governed by a king who would lead them and fight their battles.

So Samuel did what all faithful prophets do when the people are vexing them: he went to complain to God. And God did what all wise supervisors do: God explained to Samuel that this wasn't about him. It wasn't Samuel's leadership the people were rejecting; they were forsaking Yahweh. So they hatched a plan: let them have what they want, but warn them what they're really asking for.

So then we have this long explanation that Samuel gives the people about just what it will mean to have a king “govern” them. They will take your children, your flocks, your harvests, your slaves. There will be some – courtiers and officers – who receive unearned wealth and privilege, but a lot more of you will have the fruits of your labor taken from you. In other words, you are asking to be exploited.

And what did they say? “Yes, yes, please, that’s it! That’s what we want!” I hope you’re shaking your head at this point. The way the story is written, the people’s foolishness is so obvious. And yet, it feels a little too familiar too, doesn’t it?

Can you guess what they were hearing when Samuel was warning them? A king “will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers,” Samuel said. And they were each thinking, “I bet I’ll get to be a courtier. Or at least an officer. That sounds pretty good.” They were responding like what John Steinbeck called “temporarily embarrassed millionaires”. Sure, that system of income disparity and exploitation you just described sounds fine, because I’m sure I’ll be one of the lucky ones. It makes me curious how it turned out for those elders who originally asked for a king.

Now you may be wondering how any of this applies to us. We don’t have a king. We threw off a king. Nobody is asking for a king. We live in a democracy, embattled as it may be, it is still, as Winston Churchill famously referenced, “the worst form of government, except for all those others that have been tried.” In other

words, it's the best we can do. But what about this thing that's hinted at in the story, this thing that has apparently never really been tried? What would it look like to just live in community, with God as sovereign? The story implies that this is how things were before Samuel retired. But it's hinted at even more broadly in the psalm that we read. "All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away."

In this scenario, it's not Israel pining for a king; it's the other nations' kings realizing that they'd be better off letting God rule as sovereign. In our own historical context, we can think of movements that tried to enact such societal structures; many of the various utopian communities of the 1800s were based in Christianity. But as big ideas go, this picture of humanity living in harmony, depending only on God for guidance and authority doesn't seem very practical, does it? Nobody really thinks that's possible anymore. As a general rule, we've come to the conclusion that human beings simply aren't good enough to live in harmony without some official human structures of accountability and authority. Thus democracy, not very good, but the best we can do.

Despite how far removed our political systems may be from those elders of Israel, this story still has implications for us. We, too, are plagued by "temporarily embarrassed millionaire" syndrome. Too many of us will choose a system of

exploitation over more equitable structures because we like our personal chances of success. We will give over substantial freedoms and privileges for a leader who will make us feel safe and powerful. We ignore the cries of those whose labor is being stolen to keep the system going because we're feeling fine. We are afflicted with the same cynicism those Israelite elders had, ignoring the corruption that is the real problem because we assume it's an inevitability.

What would it look like to live differently within the systems our society has built up around us? There is a phrase in Psalm 138 that has been grabbing at my heart, hinting at a possible answer. In verse 3 we read, "On the day that I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul." What would it feel like to have our "strength of soul" increased? What is "strength of soul"? The best word I can think of is "integrity". Strength of soul is the capacity to hold onto and live out our values, consistently, hopefully, faithfully. Strength of soul can make a difference whether we're living with corrupt judges, exploitative kings, or an embattled democracy.

Big ideas about how society should be structured may feel irrelevant, since no one is asking us to re-design our government. It doesn't seem anyone even cares about our opinions on the filibuster! But the truth is that there are all sorts of ways we can respond to the call hinted at in this story. There are ways we can live every day as God's people, with true strength of soul, that will make a difference.

The first step is to get involved; don't assume it's up to someone else. Don't just vote; learn about what and who is on your ballot. Show up in the rooms where

it's happening, whether it's the City Council or a school board meeting or the church addressing the racism within its own structures. Reject the cynicism insisting that all politics is corrupt, when it creeps into your own heart and when others spread this destructive attitude in conversation. Counter hopelessness and helplessness by watching for what happens when people really do come together and make a difference.

We may recognize that we're not going to overhaul the whole system, but that can't stop us from working to dismantle the injustices within the systems, whether long-standing practices of racism that have created historic levels of income inequality and division, or new, extremist laws attacking the bodily autonomy of women. We make choices every day of our lives about what to buy and where to get it; one way of building up our strength of soul is to be more intentional in those choices so we can try to avoid exploiting the labor of other children of God.

Let us practice strength of soul by approaching all the structures of our society through the eyes of the conscripts, not the courtiers. Let us, as the psalmist tells us God does, "regard the lowly." Somehow, even without a king, we have ended up sending poor boys and girls into battle, to fill the pockets of the wealthy and well-connected. Let us no longer long to be like everyone else, striving for advantage and power. Let us reject systems that place some over others, gifting privilege to some at the expense of others of God's beloved children. Let us dare to be different, to call for and live out alternate ways of being, ways of honoring the values of the gospel:

compassion, mercy, and abundant life for all. Let us sing of the ways of God, a song so beautiful the courtiers and conscripts alike will stop and listen. These big ideas are nothing less than God's vision for a world living in peace and harmony, with liberty and justice for all. Every day, we have many opportunities to choose the right and reject the cynicism and apathy that would lead us in other directions. Every day, we're invited to sing this song. Let us live as though God is truly sovereign, the One whose steadfast love and faithfulness will never fail. Hallelujah and Amen.