

“Bad Choices”
1 Samuel 8:4-22
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Sunday, June 10, 2018

There must have been SOME people in ancient Israel who did NOT want - - a king.

The book of 1 Samuel says that “the people” clamored for a king - - going against the advice of Samuel - - and against God’s intentions for them. / Verse 19 says: “the people refused to listen”. / They said “NO - - we WILL have a king”

And according to God - - this is not just a rejection of Samuel’s advice - - it is a rejection of GOD. / “They have not rejected YOU Samuel - - they have rejected ME” - - is what God says - - according to this Old Testament book.

But if I know anything about “people” - - that is - - communities - - and nations - - and families - - and churches - - - - if I know ANYTHING about groups of “people” - - it’s that not EVERYONE in every group - - agrees.

Anyone here want to disagree?

Not everyone - - in every group - - agrees with the majority.

So - - - there must have been - - SOME people - - in ancient Israel - -
- - who didn’t want a king.

There must have been - - at least a few people - - who wished for another righteous Judge. / Someone more like Samuel - - who had been a fairly good leader - - someone to lead them with integrity.

But - - - THIS is NOT - - - THEIR story.

The Old Testament does not tell their story. / Instead - - it is a story of a people - - who chose - - poorly. / This is the story of people who made BAD choices.

And to the extent that WE have ever had to make a choice - - there are lessons for us.

AND - - to the extent that WE have ever made a bad choice - - this is OUR story.

AND - - to the extent that we have ever WANTED to TRY to make BETTER choices...

There is plenty to learn - - from this - - history.

This Sermon is the BEGINNING of a SERIES.

This summer - - throughout the months of June – July – and August - - - the lectionary Bible readings for preaching and worship - - recount the Old Testament history in the books of first and second Samuel. / This is a story that begins with Samuel as judge, leader and prophet - - and proceeds through the mediocre leadership of King Saul - - and through the rise and fall of the one who is considered the GREATEST leader in the history of Israel - - King David.

Most of us - - if we know any of this history - - only know part of it.

It's a long story.

And there is a lot to learn from it for our lives today. / How to live in community. / How to follow God. / What makes us NOT follow God? / What happens when God is ignored? / What is MOST important - - in our relationship with God?

These are all things we will consider this summer.

And given that Jesus - - was called KING - - and is STILL called King - - by Christians - - but in a somewhat IRONIC way - - there is important perspective for us.

What do we really mean - - by calling Jesus king?

And - - in what way is that an ironic - - or subversive - - claim?

Thinking about this history - - changed the way I heard that claim.

So this is the story of a people - - who chose the way of KINGS.

And that - - was NOT considered a GOOD choice by Samuel at the time.

And it was not considered a good choice by God - - according to the Bible.

There must have been SOME people who did NOT want a king.

But this is not their story.

Instead - - the Old Testament history - - in an nutshell - - revolves around the CHOICE of a people - - that led to corrupt national leadership.

A choice - - that led to a whole line of Kings - - who did NOT follow God.

In spite of the fact that there were SOME GOOD kings along the way...

Or I guess I should say - - there were some BETTER kings...

And some - - WORSE kings...

The Old Testament story - - the Bible - - is primarily about THAT.

It is about people - - who sometimes TRY to follow God - - but...

But - - who ALSO - - make - - - - - BAD choices.

Look at the reading for today:

Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel.

God AND Samuel - - BOTH - - warn the people AGAINST choosing the way of kings.

In no uncertain terms.

The results - - they say - - would be a DISASTER!

And they LIST - - all that could go WRONG.

By the way - - you might want to keep track of that list for later...

Just to see if that sort of thing DOES go wrong.

And I can give you a hint about that - -

So “the people” - - are warned.

And yet - - the people say - - BRING it ON anyway!

The people say - - we don't care.

We won't listen.

Why?

Because - - they are AFRAID.

Because they want - - what everyone else has.

Because they want to be - - safe and successful and powerful.

It's not impossible to understand their motives.

And it's not impossible to sympathize.

There's no point in just reading this and feeling superior.

As if - - - none of us would EVER consider such a thing.

As if - - none of us has ever made a bad choice.

Instead we could listen up - - and see if there is a more faithful way to live.

Listen - - to this story about - - what happens when we make choices out of fear and greed and self-interest - - instead of asking first - - what would GOD really want for us?

And there's more.

Even MORE than a story about the human proclivity to make BAD choices...

This is the story of how GOD - - is present ANYWAY.

This is a story of how GOD is in the midst of us - - in SPITE of ourselves.

God was present - - with the Israelites - - and stuck with them.

God's choice was - - to stay faithful to "the people" - - anyway.

God's choice was to stick with "the people" - - though thick and thin.

Was that - - a BAD choice - - on God's part?

I don't think so.

God's choice - - is the GOOD choice - - among bad choices.

Because - - MOSTLY - - this Old Testament history is MORE about GOD - - than us.

We so often want - - to make it all about us - - but it really is MORE about the nature of God - - and of how God - - STAYS - - in covenant.

Look at how this plays out in the bigger story:

Samuel was born to Hannah - - who for years couldn't have children.

She dedicates Samuel to serve God - - and he is called by God at night.

Three times.

Eli fails as a leader - - and Samuel rises.

And for 20 years - - Samuel successfully and faithfully leads the people.

Samuel leads them as a "JUDGE" - - which is an ancient tribal form of leadership.

A judge settles disputes - - and guides the tribes.

And Samuel keeps Israel safe from the powerful Philistines.

So IF Samuel has defeated Philistines - - and been faithful - - why ask for a KING?

Because the people of Israel are afraid - - of the FUTURE.

They don't believe in their hearts - - that God will really stick with them.

And so they don't stick with Samuel

And in a way - - they don't really stick with God.

And THAT - - BAD choice - - sets up ALL the problems of the future.

All the way through the reign of King David - - and beyond - -

Nevertheless - - PRIMARILY - - this is the story of God's faithfulness - - in SPITE OF -
- the unfaithfulness - - of "the people".

And the BIG question - - BEGGED - - by the whole Old Testament is this:

WILL WE - - be faithful?

Will we be faithful - - now - - in response to God's faithfulness?

In spite of PAST unfaithfulness - - will we be faithful - - in the FUTURE?

Will we BELIEVE - - in God's faithfulness?

In spite of what happens to challenge us?

In spite of the fear?

Will we believe in God's faithfulness - whether we are in the majority - or the minority?

Will we - - the people - - insist on leadership that honors God?

Will we - - the people - - try to live in ways that honor God?

Because there MUST have been SOME people in ancient Israel - - who didn't want a king - - and who rejected the ways of kings.

And EVEN though - - this is NOT their story - - they inspire me.

Imagining them - - inspires me.

It inspires me - - to think differently.

Some of them - - probably even made OTHER mistakes and bad choices.

But still - - on this one BIG choice - - they kept believing.

They kept believing in God's faithfulness.

In spite of the corruption of the later kings - - they held on the way of covenant living.

Because - - here we all still are!

Trying to figure out - - how to live faithful lives now.

And I think that the ISSUE - - really is this:

NOT figuring out how to NEVER make a bad choice.

Because we all WILL do that from time to time.

Instead the issue is - - figuring out what to do NEXT.

What to do - - AFTER making the bad choice.

That's what REALLY defines you.

As a people - - who live in the long tradition - - of sometimes making bad choices...

When you do - - - what next?

What do you do then?

Do you cling - - to your bad choice?

Or do you cling to God?

I think that part of the problem is - - we all WANT stuff.

And we think that what we WANT - - is always best.

And so we CHOOSE - - what WE want.

But do we ask the question - - what does GOD want?

What would OTHERS - - want?

As we consider that - - I'll end with a poem by Rumi.

It's called: "Who Makes These Changes?"

Who makes these changes?

I shoot an arrow right.

It lands left.

I ride after a deer and find myself

chased by a hog.

I plot to get - - what I want

and end up in prison.

I dig pits to trap others - - and fall in.

I should be suspicious - - of what I want.