

June 10, 2017 – Baptism of AJ Alexander, Celebrating Graduates
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Samuel 8:4-20

We Want a King

Do you know anyone named Samuel, or Sammy, or Sam? There are two within two blocks of the church; there's often one on one of my son's baseball teams, you can see one several times a year at the cinema: Samuel Jackson has been appearing in a movie a year, or seven movies a year, for the past thirty years. More pertinent to a sermon, there are two books of the Bible named Samuel, two Old Testament histories through which we are progressing this summer. But for all that they are named after him, these books aren't really about him. They do start with him, with Samuel's start, with the prophet Samuel back when he was an infant—even before his infancy, when Samuel was nothing more than a heartfelt prayer by his mother, Hannah, who was barren. Hannah prayed for a child, silently, fervently, despondently, and Hannah's prayers are answered. Hannah bears a son, and so she prays again. This time her prayer is one of praise, you can find this prayer at the beginning of 1 Samuel, Hannah's prayer. Her "heart exults the Lord," who fills the hungry, who "raises up the poor," who makes the lowly "sit with princes." That's what Hannah says in prayer, which sounds like another mother's prayer we'll hear later in the Bible, in the New Testament: Mary's prayer. Hannah's prayer prefigures the Magnificat.

But back to the Old Testament, which quickly progresses from Samuel's infancy, to a story from Samuel's childhood, when he hears God call him in the night. And then Samuel is all grown up; the story goes from little thing to full-fledged adult, just like that. It's like the ferns that grow along the north side of the church. One day they're these little shoots. Then it rains, they get a little water, and up they go. It's like the little children, who gather in this church, like little AJ, who is about to be baptized. We sprinkle a little water on them and they become Dennis Sherlock, or Zach Rogers, or Tommy Crook. We praise God for them today, for the young men and young women of this congregation who have reached graduation milestones.

Samuel has matured even beyond that, as the Biblical story picks up today. Leaders of Israel gather around Samuel and tell him, "You are old." People could be ageist in the olden days, too—even old people: it is the elders of Israel who tell Samuel, "You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways. We want a king."

It is a sad start to this chapter of Israel's history, sad in several ways. It's not just that at the end of a long and faithful life Samuel is not being honored; it's also the behavior of his sons, who do not follow his honorable ways. The verses just prior tell us they take bribes, pervert justice, are self-serving. They are Samuel's sons, and they are not—not in what they do. In this sad side note there is a hint of an ongoing Biblical theme, a theme that is counter to the prevailing social order of things: a critique of family assumptions and hereditary privilege. Here and in other places in the Bible—in today's gospel, with Jesus' pointed statement about his mother and brothers—there is a critique of family, of the way it can foster presumption and turn inwards. The Bible says, you cannot say you are just fine, you have a certain man as your father. "Do not presume to say that," Jesus says, in another part of the gospel. The Bible says that you cannot rest on the laurels of lineage. It will not save you. In an ancient, patriarchal, clan-based society this is a radical statement. As it still is today. We have heightened awareness, lately, of the ongoing effects of patriarchy, but it seems to me that we are still very inclined to clan-based thinking, to not only sanction, but bless an ever inward pull; a focus on an approved, inside group. I see this on the right, and on the left, this rigid, clan-based thinking. And, regardless of

political party, an elevation, even idolization, of one's own offspring. Your family is not enough. I say this today with my parents here.

The elders of Israel actually get this, in that they are not going along with the typical pattern, that Samuel's sons will be the next leaders. But what the elders ask for instead is perhaps the saddest part of the story. "We want to be like other nations," they tell Samuel, "Give us a king."

Samuel, aggrieved, talks to God about this. Samuel is like his mother Hannah in this. God hears, and is grieved. God says to Samuel, "Tell the people of Israel, whom I led out of slavery in Egypt, tell them of the ways of kings. Warn them what happens when you have a king: He will take your sons and put them in his army. He will make your daughters do labor (no doubt for less pay). He will appoint scores of people as his underlings and have them all work for his personal gain. He will stockpile weapons and take you to war." Samuel tells the people this in detail, it was a long first reading. And the people reply, "We are determined to have a king. Give us a king, so that we may be like other nations."

And they get a king. Samuel anoints Saul to be the first king of Israel, anoints him with oil, the ancient sign of kingship. The rest of Samuel, books one and two, are about Saul and his successor, David, including all those prophesied repercussions of kingship: the taking sons to war, the scores of underlings, who must work for the king's personal gain but also engage in vicious infighting. It's ancient history, but it's hard not to hear overtones of current events, to hear how well scripture predicts the ways of rulers of this world.

But this is not the end of the Biblical story, or our story. There is something yet more radical: God's determination to love us, and lead us, and teach us what is sovereign. God radically, decisively, enters and rewrites the story in Jesus. God comes to earth, in the flesh, as one of David's royal line. God comes to us in Jesus, and redefines kingship. This is our King: not one who surrounded himself with sycophants, but one who kept company with the lowly. This is our king, not one who reaped other's fields for himself, but who gave bread to all, who filled the hungry with good things. This is our king, not one who rattled swords, but who shared—who breathed—peace. This is our king: not one who lorded his authority over others, but who spoke of another way of being, another way of living, a way of truth and justice and hope. He spoke of this in many different ways, with many different stories, but there was a phrase he often used when he described this way of being, he called it "the kingdom of God."

We are all invited to be subjects of this kingdom, a kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom that is everlasting. Other realms will pass away; they are temporary, as it says in II Corinthians. The stirring poetry of that passage also puts the rulers of this world in their place; they are "a slight momentary affliction." They are nothing compared to the weight of glory about to be revealed, the kingdom of God that is coming, and is even now ours, in our baptism.

In baptism we acknowledge that family is not enough, it is implicit in the rite. Parents are not enough, they need help: godparents. Even adding godparents are enough, they need more help: they need the church. But we're not enough either, we need God to help and guide us. And God does. God gives us the gifts and the guidance we need. God pours the Spirit into us, and seals us with the cross. In baptism we are anointed, like kings of old, anointed with oil on our brows, anointed, not to be like other nations, but to be something different, to be holy—that's what "holy" means, different, special, distinctive, we are anointed to live in another realm, and spread God's reign.