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Bridge Street United Church

June 2, 2024

Readings: I Samuel 8:1-22; Psalm 138; Mark 3:20-35

Discerning A Way Forward

I Samuel, chapter 8, represents a major transition in the life of the people of Israel. It was a transition worked out in a situation we ourselves know and something with which we also wrestle in our day. What type of leadership does a society or a country require? That is the question. I do not mean political leadership in any kind of partisan way—Conservative, Liberal, NDP, or Green. But what kind of leadership do we need in terms of facing the challenges of the day? That was the issue in the situation recounted in I Samuel 8. I think that the decision reached then, and the factors that led to it, can shed light on things we need to think about in our time.

I'll come later to some of the things I think this story about leadership and how we discern the way forward might mean for us now. But I need to start by indicating where this story fits in the history of the people of Israel. I need to do that because the transition this story recounts is a major transition point in the history of the people of Israel. Knowing more about that transition, and understanding what led to it, can help us to understand more fully the Old Testament books of I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and those of the prophets. I think it also helps us to understand more fully some aspects of the New Testament.

The transition this story recounts is the transition of the people of Israel from a loose confederation of tribes, which is what they were when they entered the so-called Promised Land and settled there, to an increasingly tightly knit, centralized society. The transition also involved, at this point in time, the people opting for a king, rather than the more charismatic leadership

they have had up to this point in time. Up until now the people have lived with a more localized government arrangement, with more local control, coming together with other tribes from time to time when security has demanded it. When they faced a military threat or perceived a need to cooperate, they would act together with one or more of the other tribes. They would have been led in such an enterprise by a judge, not a legal figure in sense the term “judge” means for us, but a charismatic leader, usually with a capacity to lead them militarily and to deal with the threat. That said, these judges did provide more broad-based leadership, including the settling of disputes. The Old Testament book of Judges recounts the history of this period after the people settled in the Promised Land and before there are kings such as Saul, or David, or Solomon. The judges were usually also figures of strong faith, indeed figures who sought to bring the people of Israel back to a worship of God when they had strayed to worship other gods.

In the early chapters of I Samuel, we still have these judges—Eli, whom Samuel served in the temple as a boy—and Samuel himself, when Eli and his two sons died. But in chapter 8, we see the transition from such charismatic figures, each of whom was perceived to have been raised up by God to deal with a crisis situation, to a monarch, whose offspring will succeed to the throne unless or until that family is replaced by some other family. In the general viewpoint of the Old Testament, this transition to a monarch is viewed negatively. King David and a few of the other kings may be viewed positively, but the general Old Testament narrative views this change negatively. It is seen as a transition away from trust in God and a relationship with God to a move that placed ultimate trust in the human figure of the king. Further, this transition changed a society from one where most people were more or less equals to a much more hierarchical society, indeed a society marked by rising levels of inequality—economic inequality but also societal or class inequality. Many of the conditions that later prophets such as Amos decry are perceived to have their origins in this transition. So, too, is an increased movement

away from God under some subsequent monarchs, a movement often the result of some alliance, to worship other gods.

So, in chapter 8, when Samuel tells the elders who have come to him requesting a king what having a king will really be like, the list is negative. The trend in this direction begins during the reign of David's son Solomon, and the situation deteriorates until the entire land is taken over by other empires.

I want to comment on the situation as it is described in I Samuel, this event viewed so negatively in the general Old Testament narrative. Discerning the best route forward, governmentally speaking, in a time of great change and also a time of military threat, is not easy. The people of Israel are in a time of transition. They are moving from that loose confederacy of tribes to becoming a much more centralized nation. Economically, they are moving from being less and less nomadic, and they developing a more settled pattern of agriculture, with more reliance on crops, vineyards, olive trees, and so on than had previously been the case. There is increasing wealth on the part of some and the possibility for a dramatic increase in wealth for some if the society were to continue, as in fact it did, on a path of centralization that concentrated power in the hands of the monarch and his close friends and advisors. In addition, the people are under a significant military threat from their long-time enemy, the Philistines. They have depended upon the judge, that leader chosen by God to be their military leader. But other nations have kings who are their military leaders.

It is a complex world and a time of great change. It is understandable that "the elders," that is the leaders of the various tribes and others with positions of lesser leadership, find the notion of a king attractive. It is, after all, the pattern they see everywhere else around them. They are the peculiar people, ones who look to God to raise up a leader when necessary, who have a covenant relationship with God and with the other members of their society, relationships that

bring with them responsibilities. They are the ones in their world who are odd. In a time of crisis, a time when they may not have thought they had a lot of time to think things through, you can understand why they choose to move away from their long-established practice of a covenant-based society, a society that looked first to God. A king looks attractive. Further, they would not have thought of themselves as moving away from God, though that was to become the case.

Their desire for a king, a "strong man" we might say, is understandable for another reason. Samuel had been a good leader. But in his old age he had appointed his two sons as leaders. As the text makes clear, "Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." When a system of government fails to provide justice, then people lose faith in it and eventually there is a search for a system that will provide justice. Samuel's two sons, by taking bribes and perverting justice, were undercutting the foundation of that society. So, I understand why the notion of a king was attractive. If the leader God had chosen, Samuel in this case, was going to put his sons in positions of power, and was not going to remove them when they turned out to be unworthy, they might as well have a king. Those advocating for having a king may have concluded that they could not do worse, and they might do better.

The decision to seek a king was not unanimous. Samuel obviously opposed it, and a reading of other parts of I and II Samuel and I and II Kings makes clear that others opposed the idea of a king. But a king, Saul we discover if we keep on reading in I Samuel, is chosen. Over time, what Samuel said would happen did happen. Eventually, the society would be weakened by privilege and wealth in the hands of a few and increasing poverty a reality for many. And eventually both the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah would be overrun and a portion of its population exiled.

So what we might learn from this story? What might we take away for our time, for thinking about governance, for thinking about how our society is organized, for thinking about how our economy runs, for thinking about what we ought to say or to do? One thing is that life is complex. It was then, and it is now. Discerning a way forward, especially in challenging times, is hard. It takes thought and imagination. And it is something that we, as Christians who hold certain values—values the well-being of all God’s children and the well-being of our earth--need to do. We bring a perspective to our society.

A second, and related, point is that we cannot avoid matters of public policy, how government functions, how an economy runs. We may ignore these things, but even in ignoring them, or trying to do so, we are making a decision, by choosing not to give our support to some approach or to challenge something else. To go back to chapter 8 of I Samuel, the problem was not that the elders approached Samuel and demanded change. They needed to do so. Unfortunately, they made a poor decision, either through panic, or a lack of imagination about other possible ways of handling the situation, including a reiteration of their previous patterns of care for another and trust in God.

A third point—leadership that breaks trust can destroy an institution. For example, a minister who engages in sexual misconduct will severely damage his or her or their congregation, indeed may well destroy it. The same is true of a society or a country. When people no longer believe that justice is possible because money turns the justice system against them—which is what people thought after Samuel had appointed his two sons as his successors—then they are open to dismantling that system of governance for something else. That is what happened in the story in I Samuel. In whatever we do, no matter what our age and stage of life, no matter what our level of direct involvement in the society, we need, when we are in positions of influence, to uphold the trust placed in us.

A fourth point—like the people of Israel, we, too, as Christians, live according to a set of values. An ethical stance grounds our actions. In a time of crisis, it is tempting, indeed easy, to let those standards go. In the face of a threat, we, too, may be tempted to set aside our principles, at least for a while, in order to deal with that threat. During World War II, the Canadian government chose to intern Canadians of Japanese descent. Few protested that move at the time, though one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would now defend it. This story suggests, at least to me, that we need to be especially vigilant in times of crisis not to abandon the principles that guide us. It is hard to do that, very hard. But both history generally, and this story from our faith tradition, tell me that we need to try, to try very hard, not to abandon them.

A fifth point—the practices of others (in the story from I Samuel, the desire to be like other nations and have a king), or the way “everyone” does things, can be very seductive. “But that is what all the other kids do” was never an argument that carried great weight with my parents when I was growing up. But challenging developing practices that we know to be destructive, as an example let me use things that hurt the environment but that are appealing because they are convenient or they save us money—challenging those things is hard. I could use other examples, but I’ll use that one. In this story from I Samuel, the elders who come to Samuel looking for a king have good reasons to seek a change. But they show a lack of imagination about considering what other options—besides a king—might accomplish their ends and be more faithful to their inherited traditions of localized care, localized government, and a reliance on the God who had brought them out of slavery and cared for them on their journey toward and into the Promised Land.

In a world with many challenges, and not least among them a consumer society that depends on using more and more of this world’s goods and that will finally be destructive of our

world, in such a world we need to be imaginative. We need to be imaginative in terms of thinking about that to which our faith might call us.

I am not naïve about the challenge. We will find ourselves out of synch with many, even as a minority in ancient Israel, who struggled with the concept of having a king, found themselves out of synch with the rest of their society. Yet it was also from that minority group that a different vision was maintained and, at a later point in history, that group provided the basis for a re-building of the faith tradition.

We, too, live in complex and challenging times. I think that this story encourages us to think about what we are called to do when this world is also out of synch with our values, with what our faith tradition suggests are some grounding principles for our living and our relationships with others. May God grant us the imagination to conceive a world more like the one we believe God wants to see and also the awareness to see how we, no matter what our age or stage of life, can play our part in bringing such a world about.

And to that God who made us, to the one through whom we have seen that God most fully revealed, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

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