

A Kingdom, or a Kin-dom?

The story is more than 3000 years old, but it still resonates today. “Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it.” “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” “Beware of “groupthink,” and listen to the voice of the minority.” All of these lessons are easily drawn from this cautionary tale of how ancient Israel, wanting to be like the other nations, chose the fallible path of kingship, rejecting the Lordship of God which made them unique among the nations. It’s just like your mother’s reply when you said, “But everyone else is doing it!” “Would you jump off a cliff if everyone else was doing it?”

They took the plunge. Despite the warnings of their beloved prophet Samuel, they begged for a king. Like many peoples throughout history, they wanted a powerful man to be in charge, a strong man to make them feel like a strong people among the other nations, a leader to whom they could look up. It’s not an evil impulse on the part of the people, but the perspective of history tells us it’s also not very wise. Give a person too much power, and inevitably they will abuse it. Wise Samuel, good Samuel, God’s faithful servant, judge, and prophet Samuel sees the folly of this path. So he lays out for them what a powerful king will do.

A king will want to build up his military forces—so he’ll take your sons and make them part of his war machine.

A king will want to build up his court—so he’ll take your daughters and put them to work in the service industries which will pamper him and his cronies.

A king will want to want to build up his riches—so he’ll take your crops and your land, your livestock and your vineyards, and he’ll reward his loyal inside circle with these spoils, while you who are commoners, you who are asking for a king, are reduced to slavery. It will be just like living in Egypt under Pharaoh.

But do you notice what kind of king God is? Sometimes we think of God as an absolute ruler, one whose will cannot be contradicted, one who calls all the shots. But this story shows us that the God of the Bible is one who listens to the desires of the people and relents, even knowing that their choice is a questionable one. Samuel seems to want God to say No, but apparently God’s gift of freedom takes precedence. “Don’t take it personally, Samuel. They aren’t listening to you because they are rejecting me,” says God. Ancient Israel is like a bunch of rebellious teenagers who think they know better. God counsels Samuel, “Let them give it a try. We’ll see what happens.”

Well, what happens is a long saga, the story of the kings of Israel and Judah. Over the centuries of the monarchy, there were good kings and evil ones. Most were a combination of the two. Some remembered their sacred responsibility to be a servant of God. Many abused their power. Some were more inclined to warfare than to the administration of peace. Some enjoyed too much the luxuries of court, and some collected burdensome taxes to make themselves rich. The common theme throughout the history is that the kings and the people turned away from God, rejected the covenant with God, and traveled down paths of idolatry and injustice. Then there would be a crisis, which would lead to a restoration of relationship with God, which would soon fall apart by the choice of the people.

And so the perspective of history shows the pitfalls inherent in this human choice to follow a human king, how it encourages the human propensity for sin, and how it rejects the wisdom and grace of God. God wants us to be free, God brings us out of slavery, God gives us a covenant which promises a good way to live—and we humans always seem to think we have a better idea. Do we really need to keep learning everything the hard way?

The Bible offers a strong critique of human leaders who have too much power. In the Hebrew Bible, that critique begins with Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people. In Jesus' day, the critique is aimed at Caesar, whose power makes itself known in the Roman Empire. Under the Roman Empire, the people were impoverished by taxes, and terrorized by an occupying army. To speak of an alternative loyalty was considered seditious. And yet Jesus revived the prophetic voice, reminding the people of the vision of a Messiah, an anointed one who would usher in the reign of peace and right relationship, what he called the kingdom of God.

Now, I've always been troubled by the passage from Mark's gospel which we heard this morning, in which Jesus rejects his family in favor of those who will do the will of God. That harsh line has always made me hope I never had to make such a choice. But I never noticed until this week the verse earlier in the passage which reads, "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying 'He has gone out of his mind.'" (Mk 3:21) Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters were acting out of fear for Jesus' safety. They knew what could happen to someone who challenged the authorities and the order of the day. But Jesus was not afraid. He was compelled to preach and live under the new order, the coming order, the more powerful eternal order—the kingdom of God. He was teaching his family, and everyone else who was listening, to reject the tyranny of fear, the oppression of human kings and authorities, and to choose instead the freedom which comes with obedience to God alone.

My friends, we too must choose our loyalties. We too must choose our Lord. We too must choose the way we wish to live, the world we want to live in, the allegiances which are the ground on which we stand and the heaven toward which we reach. We too must recognize the fallibility of human sovereigns and the truth of God's faithful sovereignty.

That's what Jesus came for. That's what Jesus preached. That's why he died, that's why he rose, and that's why he calls us to be his people, his family, his kin.

For that's what he's inviting us to be when he says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mk. 3:35) Or, "Join my kin-dom." Let me take a moment to explain. The phrase "kingdom of God," or its equivalent, "kingdom of heaven," which we hear in English translations of the New Testament more than 100 times is probably the best literal translation of the original Greek phrase, *basileia tou theou*. But there are a few problems with this translation. While the English word leans toward geography, rule over a space, the Greek word also implies rule over time. And in the 21st century, language of kingship is somewhat dated and perhaps unnecessarily patriarchal. So in recent years, Christians have experimented with new translations such as the "realm of God" or the "reign of God," seeking to capture a fuller picture of the #1 theme in Jesus' preaching.

Writer Bruce Sanguin coins another alternative: the "kin-dom of God." He writes:

The vision of the difference Jesus intended to make through his movement (his purpose) is captured in a core metaphor that became his mission—to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God. You won't find the kingdom on a map, nor is it the place where the faithful go to receive

their heavenly reward. It is life, here and now, lived in right relationship to God, self, others, and today we would add the earth.

A congregation in the 21st century could do worse than to drop the “g” in kingdom, and have a mission statement that simply read, “We proclaim and enact the kin-dom of God.”

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Whatever we call it, we are called to live in it and live into it. So that nothing and no one will thwart Christ’s mission of healing the broken hearted, freeing the captive, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.

Do we choose to live as other people do, lusting after a human leader, sacrificing our sons and daughters to human greed, and submitting to human authorities out of fear or lack of hope? Or do we choose to live as God’s people, Christ’s kin, subjects in the end only to our good and gracious eternal Lord?

That is the question today’s scriptures ask of us. Who is the king of your heart? And what difference does that make in your life, and in the world?

3000 plus years ago, Samuel asked the people of Israel who their Lord was, and they chose an earthly king. 2000 years ago, Jesus asked the people of his day who their Lord was, and a few chose him. Those disciples told others, who told others, who told still more. Christ lived in their hearts, and is ready to live in our hearts today, binding us together in the family of God no matter who our earthly parents might be. He names us the kin-dom of God, and the Holy Spirit gives us power to proclaim and enact that promise of God’s almighty and eternal rule.

May God’s kin-dom come, and God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.