***BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR!***

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Texts: 1 Samuel 8:4-22 and Mark 10:35-45

Israel wanted a king. That was the gist of the problem – the political, theological and existential problem for the prophet Samuel, for the people of Israel, and ultimately for Yahweh (the Lord). From its first days as a nation formed there at the base of Mt. Sinai, Israel had been led by the Lord and the Lord’s appointed agents: first Moses, and then Joshua and the Judges, and then prophets who shared with the Lord the cries of the people and communicated back to them the Lord’s answer. Across the years the Lord had been faithful, delivering the people from danger and destruction even when the people had proved to be unfaithful; the Lord had called them back from sinful ways (usually involving the embrace of other gods and idols), and the Lord had punished them from time to time for their unfaithfulness. But Yahweh never abandoned them, never gave up on them, and continued to lead them and call them God’s chosen people.

As Samuel neared the end of his life and the elders of Israel looked at the next generation of prophets, the sons of old Samuel, they saw disaster looming. The sons of Samuel did not follow faithfully in the footsteps of their father. Yogi Berra’s son Dale once suggested:

*Me and my dad are a lot alike, but our similarities are different*.

The similarities between Samuel and his sons were as different as night and day! Samuel had been a faithful prophet of the Lord, but his sons used their positions as judges for personal gain. They took bribes and perverted justice for their own ends. The elders of Israel feared that at Samuel’s death they would be left with leaders who lacked the divine connection to God upon which they relied, corrupt prophets who would use their position for their own selfish motives. No other nation had the form of government that Israel had – prophets chosen by God to lead them. Surrounding nations had kings, and kingship seemed to offer a better alternative than relying upon God to speak through the no-good sons of Samuel! They were unwilling to wait for that disaster to happen or for God to designate some other leader. So the elders of Israel approached Samuel and asked him to designate a king to rule over them. The demand was made to Samuel, but it was really made of the Lord: *Appoint a king to govern us, like other nations!*

Throughout its history Israel had been ***unlike*** other nations, uniquely chosen by an invisible God to be God’s people. While other nations worshiped at the feet of idols and sought to placate a plethora of gods, Israel placed her trust in a single all-powerful God who claimed absolute and undiluted loyalty, a God who established a covenant with Abraham, freed the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, and formed twelve disparate tribes into a nation at the foot of Mt. Sinai with Ten Commandments to frame their lives and life together. First on that list of commandments was: *You shall have no other gods before me*. Unlike her neighbors, Israel had a relationship with Yahweh who claimed to be the only true god, the Creator of all things and all people, a God who ruled over them as divine king. No one else made the laws. No one else had authority over their lives. No one else protected them. In demanding that Samuel appoint a king, Israel was seeking someone else to rule over them. They were willing to surrender their unique place as the chosen people of God in order to be “like other nations.”

Hard to imagine, isn’t it? After all that God had done for them and all they had been through in those wilderness years, despite the faithfulness and forgiveness God had shown to them day after day and year after year and generation after generation and sin after sin, they still wanted to be more like their pagan neighbors than the faithful people God called them to be. They didn’t trust God to work things out! How could they do such a thing! Surely we would be more trusting and wouldn’t abandon God’s call to faithfulness to be more like **our** neighbors!

Like Israel we are called by God, formed into a community under God’s reign, shaped by commandments that include the Ten given at Mt. Sinai and that great commandment to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself, guided by the teachings and example of Jesus who calls us not to **be** **served** butto **serve**, yet truth be told, we still try to be like the neighbors who reject Jesus as totally unrealistic. “Blessed are the poor and woe to you who are rich,” says Jesus, but we still strive to be rich. “Love your enemies,” says Jesus, but instead we hate them. “Turn the other cheek,” says Jesus, but we’d rather get revenge. “Blessed are the meek,” says Jesus, but we want our leaders to be strong! “The first shall be last and the last first,” says Jesus, but we keep on running the rat race in order to be first. Jesus tells a parable about the prodigal son, and we say, “He got what he deserved.” Jesus tells a parable about the Good Samaritan, and we say, “America First!” Jesus tells a parable about equal pay for vineyard workers, and we say, “It’s not fair!” Jesus preaches grace, and we want law – except for ourselves, and then we want all the grace God has to give! We want to call ourselves disciples without living in the hard ways Jesus calls us to live; we want to call ourselves *Christian* and still strive to be like our neighbors, for the grass so often looks greener on the neighbor’s side of the fence. That is how the elders of Israel saw it. The grass looked greener with a king in charge, so they demanded a king.

Samuel would have rejected their request outright, and perhaps God should have too. But God didn’t. For some unknown reason, God decided in creating humankind that it was a good idea for us to have free will and to make choices, even if the choices are bad choices. The Lord recognized that in demanding a king Israel was rejecting God’s reign over them, yet the Lord let them choose for themselves. But before they did God told Samuel to warn them of the consequences of their choice, and the warning was this: Be careful what you ask for!

There is a Garth Brooks song entitled, *Thank God for Unanswered Prayers.* Upon meeting years later an old girlfriend who he had prayed would be the one for him, a now married man thanks God that the relationship with that old flame hadn’t worked out. “Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers,” he sings. You may rail at God at the time, only to thank God later that your request wasn’t granted. You just don’t know what a blessing it is until after the fact! Perhaps God might have blessed Israel by not answering the prayer for a king. But instead the Lord had Samuel warn the elders of the reality of life under a royal ruler in the hope that they might conclude for themselves that abandoning God’s leadership for that of a human king was a bad idea.

As a nation birthed in a Declaration of Independence that recites a litany of royal abuses we could have added to Samuel’s warnings about the perils and plagues of a monarchy. “He will take what is yours,” warned Samuel. “He will take your sons and your daughters, your grain and your vineyards, your male and female servants, the best of your cattle and donkeys, and a tenth of all your flocks.” God had *given* to the people; a king would *take* from them. God had given them life, freedom and an identity as God’s people; a king would take what was theirs for his own purposes. God had delivered the people from slavery in Egypt; a king would make them slaves once again. “In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves,” says Samuel, “but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” But the people refused to listen and cried out for a king so that they might have someone visible to govern them and to lead them into battle like the other nations. So God gave them a king, and while the reigns of David and Solomon seemed to validate their choice, it was not long until the people of Israel came to regret the choice they had made.

Be careful what you ask for – in your prayers, in your cries, in your demands of God – for you just might get what you ask for, and that may not be a good thing. You may have to live with the consequences of the choices you make – as a nation, as a church, as an individual – as Israel did. God does not spare us the consequences of our bad choices; but neither does God abandon us. God perseveres with us and encourages us to choose wisely. Daily God gives us the freedom to choose –

faithfulness or unfaithfulness,

right or wrong,

love or hate,

forgiveness or revenge,

giving or taking,

hope or despair,

life or death.

God gives us the freedom to strive to be like Jesus or to try to be like our neighbors. We choose! And God calls us, encourages us, urges us, even pleads with us to choose faithful, loving, forgiving, self-sacrificing paths as Jesus did. Often those are not the easy paths, nor the popular paths, nor the comfortable paths, but they are the paths we are called to choose nevertheless. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and the slave of all,” says Jesus. That is the path we are called to choose. Be careful then what you ask for – and what you choose! Amen