

You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking
Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Samuel 8:1-20

You just had to have it or had to do it or had to go there, didn't you? Everyone said it was a bad idea. Your parents said, "*not on my dime.*" Your best, most trusted friend, full of concern and earnest in tone, looked you straight in the eye and said, "I **really** cannot see this as a good move for you." Even that mellifluous voice from heaven's throne pleaded, "*Don't be an idiot!*" But you **had** to have it; **had** to do it; or **had** to go there.

What was **it** for you? That impulsive no one's the boss of me, I know what I'm doing, point of no return, can't undo what's been done boneheaded decision that earned every *I-told-you-so* you will ever hear. What was **it** for you? The fixer-upper? *Hey, Chip and Jo got nuthin' on me! But, you don't even own a hammer.* The best day, worst day of your life when you bought a boat? *But don't you get seasick?*

What was it for you? That **I know what I'm doing** moment when you had no idea what you were doing. *He had to go to Harvard he said; just had to go to Harvard; major in literary forensics, he said. So, what's he do now? Works for the bank, which is good because he's gonna need a*

big ol' loan for all that college debt. What was it for you? That ignore the warning signs, fuhgedabout the risks, tune out the advice of the experienced, I can handle it because I know more than you moment just before the wheels fell off your mojo and the wings fell off your schemes.

Imagine being the publisher who turned down the first *Harry Potter* book. *Why, that book will never sell.* At least you wouldn't be alone since there were 11 others to share your infamy. Twelve rejections. Harry Potter! Some of the worst decisions in history began with the words "*Well, we were thinking...*"

Our text today reads, "all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.'" In other words, after Exodus and conquest, Israel's elders come together and unite their voices to say to the Lord, the very Lord who had delivered Israel and brought them to this land flowing with milk and honey so that they could be a holy people, a light and a blessing to the nations, "Yeah, Lord, some of us got together and we were thinking ... we'd just as soon have a king. I mean, we appreciate everything and all ... That thing with the Red Sea was

pretty amazing ... and though it became tiresome, that bread out in the wilderness was ... filling. But gee whiz (probably a direct translation. Don't you think that's what they said?) But gee whiz, God, all the other kids in the neighborhood have a king. Why can't we have one, too?"

Oh, that pesky 10th Commandment keeps tripping us up, doesn't it? The constant coveting that occludes our capacity to comprehend reason. Like a Navy Seal and his night vision goggles, we are forever scanning the horizon and as soon as our eyes latch onto a want/target, all of our faculties are redirected toward such target. We see. We want. We must have, must do, or must go. Our inner attorney is assigned the task making a case for it; that the world may know that the benefit would not only come to us, but would redound to the betterment of all humanity. Our imaginations are assigned the task of tour guide, giving us a vivid travelogue through the Shangri La of life upon target acquisition. If I just had..., if I just did..., if I just went..., wouldn't life be grand? Meanwhile, Captain Envy is busy spraying *Round-up* over any green grass on your side of the fence.

Occasionally a member will approach me with a glowing review of some church facility they've seen or experienced – the gym with the

running track; the majestic pipe organ; the funkalicious band; the state of the art kitchen even Gordon Ramsey would envy; the youth mission trips to Outer Mongolia; the building dedicated to housing the homeless, complete with showers, a computer lab, and vans for transport. All impressive to be sure and the review by the member is glorious; and without fail, the member's impression is punctuated with the question: *Why don't we have one?* Confession – it takes a lot of energy for me not to answer, "I don't know, maybe they tithe."

Teddy Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." So true. What's the sanitized version of the old snark, "I wish I had his life and he had a feather in his armpit; then we'd both be tickled." It was Voltaire who said, "Even in those cities which seem to enjoy the blessings of peace, and where the arts flourish, the inhabitants are devoured by envy, cares and anxieties, which are greater plagues than any experienced in a town when it is under siege."

The elders of Israel lift their complaint/envy/desire to Samuel, "we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." Hmm. I thought the people fought the king's battles.

What a strange place to be in the narrative of Israel. In Genesis 12, the Lord had promised Abram: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

To Moses and Israel in the wilderness the Lord declared, "When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."

However, now that they are free and in the very land that was promised, the elders representing the people say to the Lord's appointed, Samuel, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."

It is important to note that the Israelites do have some reason for complaint. While the period of judges in Israel had served to protect the people from threat, Samuel found himself facing a predicament similar to Eli before him. While Samuel had proved competent in his role of priest/judge/leader, his sons had entered the judiciary and perverted the balance of justice by taking bribes and chipping away at what Walter Brueggemann called “the foundational social commitment of Israel – the practice of justice for all, without privilege or preference.” (Walter Brueggemann, *1and 2 Samuel*)

Samuel does not defend his sons, but the elders of Israel, rather than supporting reform within the judiciary, proposed a departure from the simple formula of the covenant: I will be your God and you will be my people.” Their solution? The naïve notion that they’d be better off with a monarchy than the covenant. The elders thrust – We want to be like the other nations. However, the intention of Yahweh had been for Israel not to be like the other nations, but to order their lives and future, as Brueggemann says, “in the odd and demanding ways of Torah and to rely on the inexplicable love and remarkable promises of Yahweh.” (Walter Brueggemann, *1and 2 Samuel*)

In Exodus, the Lord informs his people Israel, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” And now, Israel answers, “Nope, we'd rather have a king.”

There's a traditional prayer in the historic liturgy of the church that contains a line where we, the supplicant, acknowledge to God, “You know our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking.” For centuries the church has lifted that prayer because for centuries it has remained so true. We profess our faith and then spend our lives telling God what we think God needs to do, because we know better?

Like a parent, the Lord instructs Samuel to allow the request but not without pointing out the consequences of their desire and decision. Emphatically, the Lord has Samuel inform the people that their ideal of a monarchy will surely crash into reality. The predominant verb Samuel uses to expose this is *take*. Six times the verb is used to describe what this king they so desire will take from them.

A king, eh? So, this is what you may get from a king. The king can take your sons and your daughters for his army; any number of you will be plowing his fields, fields that were requisitioned or maybe just seized out of your land and your orchards; but on the others hand you won't need as much land because the king will be helping himself to a percentage of your flocks, too. Others of you won't have any time for farming anyway because you will be toiling day and night to make the king's swords and chariots, that your sons and daughters will be carrying into battle where they will be sacrificed in the name of your "security" but in reality, killed for nothing more than the king's power and glory. Oh, and by the way, with a king there is always the possibility of slavery. So, you've got that to look forward to, which is nice.

Forgive me for employing a Monty Python scene two weeks in a row, but I'm feeling repressed, I'm feeling repressed!

Well friends, the polls closed and the will of the body politic was revealed: "The people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us.'" Some things never

change; maybe Churchill was right, “The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.?

God accedes to the people’s demand, leaving theologians and Bible scholars scratching their heads ever since. Was God giving up? Giving in? Or, was something else going on here? I don’t know that we’re meant to draw any conclusions about God’s motivations for allowing what clearly does not seem in Israel’s best interest, but there is an important commentary being made here about the rule of God vs. the rule of humanity, and about our trust in God vs. our trust in ourselves.

God is loving and God is just, and it is only when justice and love are in alignment, in balance, in synchrony where relationship can be whole. But post-Adam, self-interest restrains our capacity to love and skews our perception of what is just. So, unless there are checks and balances to restrain our self-interest and correct our skewed vision we cannot begin to approximate an environment, much less a world where there is justice and equality and opportunity for all.

Living together necessitates some structure of governance, but whether it’s a monarchy, a republic, a commune, a democracy, an

oligarchy, or a socialized state, we cannot create what self-interest has taken away from us, the synchrony of justice and love that provide wholeness in relationship and community. Only God can provide what our structures of governance, however necessary, cannot.

So, maybe what God is saying to Israel's elders and us here is that we are seldom as smart as we think we are and neither are the neighbors we envy. There is no flag, no government, no knight in shining armor, no unctuous tongued politician, no charismatic monarch that will usher in heaven on earth. Self-interest makes that impossible. So sayeth the prophet, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight, and God will make straight your paths." And elsewhere, the prophet speaks, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Whether a king conquers or a government is entrusted by a mandate of the masses, human endeavors, however noble and necessary, will not provide what only God can give, the synchrony of love and justice that heal the human heart and mend a broken world. Amen.