

Healthy Leadership 1: Give Us a King!

1 Samuel 8

The Pathway to Healthy Leadership: Studies in Exodus on Moses as Leader

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Over the next several months and to late 2008, this country will be preoccupied with the main question around leadership for our future. Leadership is one of the main topics of concern, not only in this country, but in the world today. We will, for the next few weeks, look at a theology of what God intends for leaders to practice. It grows out of the very nature of God himself and spreads to the expectation of all of God's people. What kind of leaders shall we be?

Today we look at the core text around the kind of leadership God expects in the Old Testament. The core call of the people of God turned into: "Give us a king." And, in so doing, they rejected the kingship of God and the intent of God for all people. Our strategic plan has a core statement in it about leadership: that we are called, as a church, to prepare healthy leaders in Christ for all aspects of life. For many years, we've had a self-reflection in this congregation that we are a church of leaders and we are a leadership church. It is time for us to explore what it means for us to live into God's plan in Jesus Christ for that kind of leadership. Let us pray.

High King of heaven, you are speaking to us now by the power of your true Word. We call upon you, with your Holy Spirit, to move among us-- that we might see the true nature of your Father in heaven, the grace and mercy of who you are as Lord and Savior, and the empowering presence of your Holy Spirit in the community of grace. So speak to us now, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Give us a king! We are not happy with the leadership that you provided, God. It's inadequate to our world needs, our patterns of life, our expectations. I mean, after all, look at the way things are: the prophets that you have given to us, the judges that you have provided--one is getting old, and the others have turned away from you. They have failed you, and we need better leadership. Give us a king.

Have you felt, at some moment in your life, that the country was in such turmoil... or that your family was in such confusion... or that your marriage was in such conflict... or your business was dysfunctional... that you needed someone to come in as king, or sovereign, and set it straight? I think it is a deep hunger on all of our parts that we wish an earthly king would set everything right--often referred to as a "messianic" expectation. And we place that, not only upon earthly leaders, but earthly systems and patterns of life. And it was no different for the people of God in the Old Testament.

Why do we demand a king? Israel is in such a place of frustration and turmoil that they want someone to make things straight. They want someone to set them as a player in the international league of nations. Things are so bad, and so disoriented, and so disjointed, that it seems like they are not one nation. But here is an important lesson in the text: be careful for what you pray. Be careful for what you ask, because God may give it to you. And it is surely the pattern that the people of God in the Old Testament complained long enough, and hard enough, that God finally said, "Samuel, give them what they want. They want a king, let them have a king and see what happens."

Why do we hunger for kings in our lives? Someone who would have absolute power and authority to do things the way we want them done. Sometimes we set ourselves up as kings. Someone who will have a clear centralized system--to be able gather enough force and power to accomplish what the nation, or what the company, or what the family wants. Someone at the top who's visible... that we can point to... that we can see... that we can admire... whom we can call 'leader' and 'king.' Someone who has the authority just to get things done that we want to have done. Someone to fight our battles; someone to make us secure. Someone whom we can see to celebrate--and even idolize--if we desire.

And when was the last time Israel had a king? If we remember back before the Exodus, Israel is in Egypt as slaves; and they have a king-- Pharaoh. They cry out because of the enslavement of Pharaoh--that God would deliver them; and God does intervene. But God points out in this text that, from that point on, they have never really embraced God as their king. God has given them prophets to lead them, to train them; judges to help them mediate and moderate their life; and all have deferred to the powerful presence of Almighty God. And yet, the people have never settled into that pattern. They do not want the kind of God who doesn't perform according to their expectations. God is unpredictable. God shows up when God wants to. God speaks when God intends to. God acts and does the kinds of things... in some ways--as one commentator put it, "God is kind of odd." We would rather have someone who's more consistent, visible, and we can depend upon.

There are many kinds of kings in our lives: husbands who rule over wives; bosses who rule over businesses; parents who rule over families and children; pastors who rule over congregations; coaches who rule over teams; conductors who rule over orchestras; directors who rule over corporations; bishops who rule over denominations; bullies who rule over playgrounds; and gangs who rule over streets. Kings rule over countries; and according to this text, the overwhelming word is: kings take away our life. Six times it says that the king will take things that are important to you.

For many years, I've sung in choral groups. I've enjoyed singing, but there's always a tension in a choral group, in my experience, between the call of the leader to take control of the group and demand of the group, and tell the group what to do and how to do it, and the group's desire for a kind, gentle, and understanding presence. Groups that often have the kind side of leadership complain because the leader is not more dictatorial. Groups that have a dictator complain that the leader is not more kind and generous. In fact, one of the things I believe we like about kings is that we love to complain about them!

Now my personal experience is that my dad had control issues; and I learned some of those control patterns in my life. My wife will

remind me, on a number of occasions, that I like to control the steering wheel of the car and the remote control of the multimedia. You may have control issues in your life where you want to be sovereign over your turf. My dad's focus of control had to do with money. He was a generous person; but his generosity was his decision—it was his money. This came to a head just a few years back when both my mother and father received an inheritance from a woman they had cared for until she died—into her 100-plus years. She had given them both an inheritance and named them both to the will. We had a conversation in our family where my father said, “Well, she gave me the money.” We went to the will and looked at it, and it said clearly: 50 percent goes to Dad and 50 percent goes to Mom. My dad said, “Well, you don't know how it works in this family. My money is my money, and your mom's money is my money.” And finally she said, “John, I'm not going to take that from you anymore.” She rose up and declared some independence.

There are moments in our lives where we declare ourselves to be sovereign over things that belong to others. There are moments where we want someone to become sovereign over things that belong to us. The king will take your sons, your daughters, the best of your fields, your vineyards, your orchards, ten percent of your produce. The king will take your slaves, your livestock. The king will take ten percent of your flocks. But here is the important statement at the summary point in the text: “And you will become slaves.” Connected to the expectation of the kingship is the reality that people will be enslaved.

You cannot have a king and a sovereign without slavery, if you're talking about earthly patterns of reality. The summary result of the rule of a king over a period of time is: you will be his slaves. That model was still seared in the minds of the people in the pattern of Pharaoh who enslaved them; and they had spent many years getting away from his enslavement. Controlling leaders enslave people through coercion... threat...manipulation...seduction...and oppression. Centralized wealth has a tendency to impoverish people.

The United States of America has been founded over and against kings. Our Declaration of Independence is a declaration of independence from the King of England, George III. With these kinds of statements, that “all people are created equal and have inalienable rights,” the people have the power, not the king. Power comes from the consent of the governed. We will decide what kind of government we will have. The right of the people is to alter the government if they are under the powers of destructive leadership. Because of a long train of abuses and usurpations under absolute despotism, a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, the King had made judges dependent upon his will alone. Oppressions had been responded to with petitions of redress that had been answered by repeated injury on the part of the King of England, who had turned a deaf ear to justice. In our country, we are deeply founded upon the principle that we will not serve a king. And that's really what the Bible calls for--that we, as human beings, would never serve an earthly king.

Then why do we want kings? We want security. We want protection. Sometimes we don't want the responsibility to govern our own lives because that responsibility is too weighty and too hard. We would rather have a visible God to pay high esteem to, than an invisible God that we can't find when we need Him. We don't want the power, nor the authority, nor the responsibility. Or, we individually want more power, and authority, and responsibility to be our own sovereigns--we don't want to give that to anybody else. We would rather complain than have God be King and Lord of our lives.

Now, there are two sides to every system of sovereignty: there's the side of the king, and the side of the slaves. Slaves desire kings; and kings make slaves. It's hard to break the system. In fact, we see in the Old Testament, that God tried to break that system for centuries and was unsuccessful. He finally gives over to the will of the people to give them a king. The root problem is this: not that kings control people—but that people demand kings. The initiative comes from the people: Give us a king! It is the temptation of all gathered people, in times of crisis and difficulty, to expect someone to rise up and rule over them.

But God has always had a different plan and a different vision. Remember that text in the middle of Exodus where God lays out the vision for the people near Mount Sinai, with these words: “You have seen what I did to these Egyptians, people, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself” --the emphasis is on God himself. “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 kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” And we know that that theme is reverberating throughout the New Testament: a kingdom of priests; a holy nation. God has an alternate plan--not a king who makes slaves, but a king who sets up prophets and judges; a king who makes priests.

God delivered Israel from the power of pharaohs so that they would become a nation of priests together. And what do priests do? Priests speak directly to God. They bring God to each other, and to the people. They bring the people to God. They help the people to take responsibility for their life together. And they help the people be released from the assumption that they cannot have the power to act in their own lives. Priests give people access...give people information...the right teaching... the power to grow and change. Priests train, empower, and invite people into responsibility. They bridge the gap between elite and ordinary; and we are called to be priests.

The great Italian tenor, Luciano Pavarotti, died this week. He was called “King of the High C's,” because he could sing a high C more frequently and longer—with sustained volume and power--than any of his contemporaries. He was one of the few who could sing Rossini's William Tell opera, because there are 28 high C's in that work, and two high C-sharps. And he sang them well. One of Pavarotti's desires was to bring the music that was considered elite and aristocratic to the ordinary people. His passion was to be a priest of music so that every one of us would have access to the greatest music that has been written. As he said, “God touched my voice, and gave me the opportunity and power to draw people to great music.” He saw himself not as a king, but as a priest.

I was fortunate to have, in my high school experience, a director of music who saw his role in the same way. While he was highly disciplined and focused, he was purposeful. He had a powerful ability to draw us in, as high school young people, to the great music of the world. He empowered us to experience it and to sing it. He was a priest among us.

Jim Collins talks about priests of business in his book, Good to Great. He points out that the kind of Level 5 Leader—the great leaders of corporations and businesses in the world—are not people who call all attention to themselves, are not like kings and sovereigns. In fact, they are often very quiet and humble. They are committed to the good of the people in the business and getting

the work done. They are committed to building what is the best for the products and the people, and they will do that to the best of their ability. They are not arrogant or egocentric. They are servants to accomplish the purpose of what they are called to do.

Jack and Judy Balwick talk about parents who are priests to their children. Parents' job is not to control their children. Yes, discipline, and yes, they're in authority; but it is embedded in the practice of love and grace. And so, parents are called to empower their children to become completely mature and responsible adults in the world--as priests to their children. I've had personal experience by observing Pete Carroll, the head coach of USC. Go Trojans! I had access to Pete Carroll because his daughter played club volleyball at the same time my daughter did. And what I saw about Pete Carroll--outside of coaching, in the presence of other people in the crowd, cheering on his daughter--was this tremendous passion to see his daughter have fun and do well at the game. And I thought: there's the key to his coaching--a priest who wants to empower even his own child, to do well and to enjoy a sport.

My question for you today is: Are you determined to be a person of control... and authoritarianism... and power? Or are you determined to be a person of service and priesthood to your brothers and sisters in this church, and to the world? Do you go in with the expectation that attention will come to you, and that you will control the attention? Or do you come with an expectation that you are there to give? Sovereign kings take; but God's pattern of leadership gives. For it is in Jesus Christ that we see that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. He did not come to take things away from us, but to give us an abundant life. God is the king who gives--who shares the power and the wealth; who brings justice; who gives all the gifts. And Jesus is the primary model of that chief priest who makes priests of all of his people.

Elvis Presley was called the "King of Rock 'n' Roll." He was admired, and given adulation, and worshiped by many as the "god of rock 'n' roll." But, if you know anything about the pattern of Elvis, he felt very uncomfortable with that public celebration. In fact, some think it may be one of the reasons that drove him to some drug abuse. On one particular occasion, there was a group of young women in the front rows calling out, "You are the king, Elvis! You are the greatest!" He stopped the concert in the midst, and said to them, "No, you're wrong. There is only one King and Savior, and it's Jesus Christ, my King and Savior. I am not the king." He demonstrated this quietly offstage when, after concerts, he would gather his friends together who were Gospel quartet singers--and they together, with his presence, would sing the great Gospel hymns and celebrate Jesus. All of them will tell you the stories that that's the Elvis Presley they knew and admired the most--the priest who invited them into the singing of Jesus Christ.

Today we have choices to make about this. Do we want to be people who give away our responsibility in life and declare ourselves to be slaves, and demand kings? Or will we be a people who embrace our priesthood and follow our great King Jesus Christ into that responsibility? There is only one King. And God has given us that King--and it is the King Jesus Christ, Lord of all. And that King does not take. That King gives life to us, so that we might share our life with one another.

Let us pray. Now Lord Jesus Christ, in the love of your Father, and the power of your Spirit, move us to take up the mission of being your priests to one another and priests in your world. Redeem us from the temptation to call for kings and become their slaves. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.