

## **Be Responsible Citizens of God's Kin-dom** **1 Samuel 8:4-20**

### **Education Sunday**

Today, we are celebrating Education Sunday and congratulate Ben, Eva, Isaiah and all those who have reached educational achievements. No matter if they finished one more school year or have earned a Ph.D., they have learned things that can equip them to be better people and be better at serving the community. This is no small achievement. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Through education, we not only gain knowledge and skills, but we also become more free and ethically responsible human beings. Indeed, becoming free and responsible human beings through life-long learning is God's precious gift for us.

### **Kingship from below**

Today's scripture reading is about a transition from the time of judgement to the beginning of kingship in Israel. When Samuel got to be an old man, he set his sons up as judges in Israel, but the people were not happy with them because unlike Samuel, "they were out for what they could get for themselves, taking bribes, corrupting justice." (v. 3) So all the elders of Israel got together and confronted Samuel at Ramah. They asked him to appoint a king to rule them, like every other tribe. People wanted to have a king and this was a very exceptional case even in the ancient near-eastern world.

According to Roger Nam, a professor of Hebrew Bible, kingship was always initiated from the gods above."<sup>1</sup> You have heard about the Code of Hammurapi, which is a Babylonian code of law enacted by King Hammurabi. If you don't think so, I'm sure you have heard the expression, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." It comes from the Code of Hammurabi. Let me show you an image of the code. Can you guess who is the king in this image? Most of us mistakenly assume that Hammurapi is the one on the throne, but Hammurabi is not sitting on the throne. He is the one standing, humbly receiving the scepter from the enthroned Marduk, the ancient Babylonian god. This image tells us about the standard understanding of kingship in the ancient Near East. Nam wrote, "The gods created the institution of monarchy so that their will would be executed on earth through earthly rulers."<sup>2</sup> In other words, kingship was initiated by the gods.

However, we have just read a radically different origin of kingship for Ancient Israel. It's not God who entrusted a king to rule Israel. Rather, the people wanted to have a king to govern so that they could be like other nations. (v.5) For Israel, God was the king who governed them through judges, but now the people wanted to have their own king. It meant rejecting God as their king. Samuel was crushed by the people's request for a king because this request represented the Israelites' lack of faith in God. Samuel was a spiritual leader of Israel and now he had just heard from the people that "we don't trust God so give us a king!" What would he have felt about it? Samuel might have felt that he had failed to do his job. Disappointed Samuel prayed to God and God's response was somewhat unexpected.

### **God granted us the freedom to make decision**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-10-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-84-11-12-15-16-20-1114-15-2>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“Go ahead and do what they’re asking. They are not rejecting you. They’ve rejected me as their King. From the day I brought them out of Egypt until this very day they’ve been behaving like this, leaving me for other gods. And now they’re doing it to you. So let them have their own way, but warn them of what they’re in for. Tell them the way kings operate, just what they’re likely to get from a king.” (v 7-9, MSG)

Instead of claiming God’s own authority or punishing these rebellious people, God let go of his authority and gave people agency. In other words, God granted people the freedom to make good and bad decisions. This is what we often forget. Last Sunday after worship, David Dorsey asked me a difficult theological question. I don’t remember the exact wording but it went something like this: If God is omniscient and knows everything that is going to happen, what happens to our human agency? If God knows everything that we will do and its consequences, we may feel that we don’t have any freedom and that what we do doesn’t really matter because what will happen, will happen. We may eventually end up with a sense of fatalism. However, the Bible tells us a different story. God knew the consequence of people’s decision to have a king and warned them. God still limits God’s own authority and gives people the freedom to make decisions about their own lives. In this sense, our freedom to make decisions is God’s gift for us, given through God’s self-sacrifice of limiting God’s own authority. It is a precious gift so we have to be more responsible in our decision making and actions.

When bad things happen, people tend to complain about God, “why did this happen to me?” When a mass shooting happens in a school or church, we asked God, ‘why?’ But this is the wrong question to ask God. Human-made tragedies mostly happen when we, human beings, make bad decision. We all know why school shootings keep happening in our country? There are too many guns and too low a bar to get one. The greed of gun companies and people who are enticed to the false sense of security and unjust gun laws continue to create these tragedies over and over again. It’s our decisions that perpetuate this tragic situation. Sometimes, we make bad decisions for ourselves. Sometimes, a bad decision by others can create suffering in our lives. God knows the consequences of people’s decisions and often warns people to change their thinking and behaviors through prophets, the faithful people of God and Jesus Christ. But God still allows us to make decisions. God’s response resembles a parent who warns their children but still lets them make decisions, and faces any consequences along with them. So, we have to responsibly exercise our freedom to make decision because it’s God’s gift and they impact many lives. We should be responsible citizens of the United States, but more importantly, God’s kin-dom. As Christians, the best decision we can make is to acknowledge and accept God as our king.

### **Be Responsible Citizens of God's Kin-dom**

One of the important decisions you will make this year is in a voting booth. Right? This year, we have a presidential election. Unfortunately, we live in an extremely polarized political atmosphere. One of the negative impacts of this political polarization is that many people, including Christians, blindly support the candidate of their party and see them as the savior of the nation. No matter what the candidate did or who they are, some Christians support and even seem to worship them like their king entrusted by God. Why is this happening? Theologically speaking, it happens because those Christians reject God as their king and want to have their own king like other people do. Before we become responsible citizens of a nation, we, Christians, first need to be responsible citizens of God's kin-dom, who give our ultimate loyalty only to God and live by the principles of love and grace.

I have relatively good eyesight but there are two occasions in which I cannot see things clearly. One occasion is when an object is too far away from me. I can't read a sign a mile away. The other occasion is when the object is too close to me. Giving our ultimate loyalty to political figures is like getting too close to the object so that we cannot see them properly. By giving our ultimate loyalty to God, we can attain a critical distance from them to see and discern who they are and what they do. Only then can we make a proper decision as a Christian. I am not telling you that you should support a particular candidate or political party. No. I want you to remember that you are citizens of God's kin-dom first, before you are a member of any political party or nation. Just as God liberated the Israelites from slavery, God has freed us from sin and bondage. So do not foolishly choose something else as your king or god. As free people of God, give your loyalty to God and try to make your best decision as a citizen of God's kin-dom. Amen.