

Samuel as Judge

³Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the LORD only.

⁵Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and said, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

⁷When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines." ⁹So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD; Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. ¹¹And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.

¹²Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah,^[b] and named it Ebenezer;^[c] for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." ¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

¹⁵Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ¹⁶He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD.

Message

“I Have Heard My People’s Cry”

The hymn “Here I Am, Lord” – now a frequent favorite of Catholics and Protestants alike was written by a 31-year -old Jesuit studying theology at Berkley, California. A friend of Dan Schutte asked him to compose a song for an upcoming diaconate ordination Mass. He was asked if he would compose a song on a Wednesday; the service was to be held the following Saturday. To top it all off, he was still recovering from the flu when he was asked to write it.

But he sat down with guitar in hand and instructions from his friend to include images of the word of God, the light of Christ, and the bread and wine. Also, thinking that this song was to be about vocation, calling, hearing God’s word and actively responding, he turned to the prophets who heard God’s word and wrote it down, and began to pray.

(“Here I Am, Lord”: The little-known story behind a Catholic hit; America: The Jesuit Review; Colleen Dulle, October 12, 2017)

The song we sing now leans heavily on the story of the call of Samuel to tell its story. *Here I am, Lord. Speak, your servant is listening.* In 1 Samuel 3, the conversation between Eli and Samuel in the temple is almost a comical one. Samuel hears God calling and wonders where the voice is coming from. He asks his mentoring priest, who basically tells him to shut up and listen. The second phrase of the familiar chorus, the doubtful question, “Is it I, Lord?” then was encouraged and supported by a number of other Jesuits who were writing soul-searching liturgical folk music in the 1970’s and the scripture text itself in which prophets almost always seem to doubt their call from God. And now, for those of us who sing that chorus, isn’t it good to know that it isn’t always clear that God is speaking directly to us? Is it me, Lord? Are you sure it’s me? Wouldn’t you rather have somebody else?

But today, as we enter Samuel's narrative beyond his "yes" – I want to take this morning to look at the life and ministry of this early, early prophet of God. Samuel is called, as we might say today, to speak truth to power. The first thing God says to him beyond his calling is, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." If I were Samuel, that would make me want to back up and reconsider that "Here I am, send me," that was part of the contract. But no, Samuel grew up in Hannah's household. His mother had a vision, a prayer, an exhortation that happens to be one of the earliest texts of scripture. And in that proclamation, she knows what God will do when the powerful get too big for their britches and the needy have fallen on the ash heap of life. God will bring about a reversal. That reversal will blow the minds of anyone who has gotten used to the haves having all they want and the have-nots getting what most would say they deserve, nothing. She also reminds us that God will guard the feet of the faithful and the wicked will be cut off in darkness, for not by might does one prevail. The Lord's adversaries will be SHATTERED, and the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

Well, guess who the Lord appointed to be that judge? ---SAMUEL!!!

The longest part of Samuel's life and ministry is as a judge over the Hebrew people. He takes this role seriously and leans on his mother's vision as his own truth. He was judge during the time when the Philistines had been beating up on the Hebrew people. But even Samuel cautioned that maybe they were being taken over because they had forgotten who God was. "Return to God" was his endless preaching. Give up your false gods, your idols, your evil ways. Return to

justice. Return to mercy. Return to kindness and patience and generosity. The people do listen to Samuel, and they begin to cry out to God for mercy. Pray for us, they say. Pray that God will hear our plea and save us, ultimately, from the Philistines and from our own temptations to all that is wrong in the world.

But this time it was really serious. Not only had the people been decimated in battle, the Philistines stole the Ark of the Covenant. You've seen the Indiana Jones movie, I'm sure. That's cause for grave concern! The Ark is missing, and it was THE physical representation of God's presence within the Hebrew culture. Without that symbol – had God's presence left them? Was it with the Philistines now? How would Samuel comfort the people when their towns had been ravaged and their God was missing?

Whether it was the result of the Hebrew people crying out or the Philistines noticing that the Ark in their midst was absolutely nothing but trouble, God is seen as acting on behalf of the Israelite people to restore justice. The Philistines back down, withdraw from their cities, and return the Ark, and from that point thereafter, Samuel reigns as Judge over Israel. Now if you want to read some really weird biblical chapters about how the Ark causes all kinds of plagues and trouble in the wrong hands – just like in the movie – you can read the chapters between Samuel's call and his judging of Israel. It's some seriously strange stuff that makes one wonder how anyone reads the Bible on their own and makes sense of the over-arching story.

When the Ark has been returned, and the cities are beginning to be restored, and the people want Samuel to pray for them some more - Samuel offers a sacrifice, and then sets up a healing stone

between Mizpah and Jeshanah, a stone he calls “Ebenezer” to mean, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.” Ever wonder why so many African American churches take the name Ebenezer? It’s a reminder of the healing stone, a marker set as a reminder that, thus far, God has always chosen to help, even when the circumstances are incredibly dire.

Anyhow, the point of Samuel’s life as a judge is that he consistently preaches a return to God, the people listen, and God, as always, helps the very people that God has chosen to love. “The Lord has helped us thus far,” the healing rock, Ebenezer reminds us. Remember that, because that pattern of recklessness, remorse, return, and rejoicing will come up again, and again, and again.

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and 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." ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me,^[a] from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle^[b] and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

Israel's Request for a King Granted

¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

Message

“They Turn Away”

Samuel had a pretty good run as a Judge and as a circuit-riding preacher, but those days are over. He’s getting older. The people are growing restless, again. Apparently, it doesn’t take long to forget how God’s hand had saved them from the Philistines. They are displeased with Samuel’s sons and don’t want them taking over when Samuel dies. But even more so, they feel like the little dog in the midst of a big dog party. All of the nations surrounding Israel, are big, and powerful, and run by Kings – not governed by Judges.

They are tired of listening to Samuel and his constant pleading for them to return to God. They want to have might and authority in the world. We want what they have, the elders tell Samuel, a King. Ask God, they say, to put a King over us.

This disappoints both Samuel and God. Samuel feels rejected. God’s authority has been rejected, and yet God allows the people to get what they want – that is – they get what they want with an incredible warning attached. Almost a “you don’t know what you are asking for” warning.

Should you get a King, Samuel tells them, this is most certainly the kind of King you are going to get:

He will take your sons and use them to build military might and agricultural strength.

He will take your daughters and they will become perfumers and cooks for himself.

He will take the best of your vineyards and orchards for himself and his court.

He will take your slaves and livestock and put them to his work.

He will take 1/10 of your flock and make you his slaves.

And then, basically, God will let you eat your own words. God won't help you when this goes terribly, horribly wrong. Oh yes, the people turn away. They reject God again – within Samuel's lifetime.

The next several chapters go on to describe the arrogance of Saul – who gets selected and crowned as King over Israel. And all the things happen just as Samuel predicted. The Kingdom brings hardship to the Israelites, just as being attacked by their neighbors had brought great pain to the Israelites before.

So, we wonder about the consequences of this, of our own actions, of the times we want to be big shots like our neighbors or have the ease of a government that we don't think too much about as long as it is powerful and known in the world. There are a lot of lessons in this text about “turning away,” and perhaps the biggest one is that we aren't necessarily punished “for” our sins, but we certainly are punished “by” our sins. Our own lust for power and greed can be precisely what puts us under the thumb of those who would wield power, first for themselves, and then maybe for a nation they want to control. I'll stop there – and let the text itself continue with Samuel's farewell prayer.

Samuel's Farewell Address

12 Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you. ²See, it is the king who leads you now; I am old and gray, but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day. ³Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me^[a] and I will restore it to you." ⁴They said, "You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone." ⁵He said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand." And they said, "He is witness."

⁶Samuel said to the people, "The LORD is witness, who^[b] appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of the land of Egypt. ⁷Now therefore take your stand, so that I may enter into judgment with you before the LORD, and I will declare to you^[c] all the saving deeds of the LORD that he performed for you and for your ancestors. ⁸When Jacob went into Egypt and the Egyptians oppressed them,^[d] then your ancestors cried to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt, and settled them in this place. ⁹But they forgot the LORD their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of King Jabin of^[e] Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. ¹⁰Then they cried to the LORD, and said, 'We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD, and have served the Baals and the Astartes; but now rescue us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you.' ¹¹And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak,^[f] and Jephthah, and Samson,^[g] and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you lived in safety. ¹²But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' though the LORD your God was your king. ¹³See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the LORD has set a king over you. ¹⁴If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; ¹⁵but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.^[h] ¹⁶Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. ¹⁷Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain;

and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the LORD is great in demanding a king for yourselves." ¹⁸So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

¹⁹All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." ²⁰And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; ²¹and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. ²²For the LORD will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself. ²³Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. ²⁴Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. ²⁵But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king."

Message

“I Will Give My Life to Them”

Samuel has given it all he had. He gave his life to these people, in God’s name. He was God’s chosen, called and sent, to communicate to God’s people a very consistent message. God will save them. God can be trusted. God is their King. Their Savior. Their lifeline in all kinds of trouble. They will forget this news, again, and again, and again. But the good news is that they will also return to God again, and again, and again.

At the end of his life, he is returning to his mother’s prayer for justice. Was I the one who took from you, or hurt you, or made your life hard? If so, let’s settle our accounts now. No, then bear witness to exactly what news I bring from God – which is good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind... Well, maybe we’ve heard those lines from other prophets, but they play the very same tune.

If you follow the Lord, he tells them, AGAIN, it will be well. How often do we have to hear that in our own lives to believe it? How many times have we added to our own struggle with requests that made life worse not better? But here’s Samuel, and of course we know that Jesus, is delivering the same message – a message that his mother taught him too. God is the God of justice and of love. The Lord will not cast away his people. Pray. Give thanks. Receive grace.

For you will grow restless, then show remorse, then return to God, then rejoice in God’s favor – but this cycle seems to be forever set on repeat. We don’t get to the final answer, at least not in this life. But I am grateful for the Bible’s repetitiveness, the prophets’ consistency, and the church’s hope. We can know God’s love, and cling to the healing rock, “Thus far, the Lord has

helped us.” And the Lord will help us again. May we return and return, again and again, and be held by the grace of God’s love. Amen.