

17 January 2021

Saul: “A King, like All the Other Nations
1 Samuel 8-15 (Psalm 45:1-7)

Today in our story journey through scripture we move finally from the period of the judges to the beginning of the Israelite kingdom. Many of the psalms in the Bible reflect this time, celebrating the king as the representative of God on earth. Today we read from Psalm 45, which was perhaps written for a coronation. Psalm 45:1-7.

- ¹ *My heart overflows with a goodly theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.*
- ² *You are the most handsome of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you forever.*
- ³ *Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your glory and majesty.*
- ⁴ *In your majesty ride on victoriously
for the cause of truth and to defend the right;
let your right hand teach you dread deeds.*
- ⁵ *Your arrows are sharp
in the heart of the king's enemies;
the peoples fall under you.*
- ⁶ *Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever.
Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;*
- ⁷ *you love righteousness and hate wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.*

And so, as we saw last time, Samuel was raised in the tabernacle, was called by God, and led the scattered tribes of Israel his whole life. He would travel in a circuit around the land, hearing cases and officiating at offerings. Samuel married and had sons, and when they were grown, he appointed them judges, too. All his life, Samuel was faithful, rigorously honest, and devoted to God. His sons . . . were not. They were more like Eli's sons, whom we heard about last time: providing their services for the highest bidder.

So it came about that the leaders of the tribes came to Samuel at his home in Ramah and said, “Samuel, sir, you're getting old, and we're worried. What will happen when you're gone?”

“There are my sons.”

“Yes, sir. Um, about that. Your sons aren't like you.”

“Well, what you want me to do?”

“We want you to anoint us a king, like all the other nations have. We want a king.”

“Well, you can’t have one! That was never God’s plan for Israel! Get out of my sight!” Samuel stomped off to unburden himself to God. “Did you hear that? I can’t believe it! All this time I’ve been leading them, and this is the thanks I get? A king!”

He ranted on a while, and when he paused for breath, God said, “So give them a king.”

“What? But you didn’t want Israel to have a king like everyone else! You had a different plan!”

“That’s true. But did you think I had only one plan? All my plans depend on humans keeping covenant, so I need to have backups. I can work with this.”

“I just can’t believe that after all I’ve done for –”

“Samuel! It’s not about you. They aren’t rejecting your leadership. They’re rejecting mine. You get used to it after a while. We’ll try a different direction for a bit. Give them a king, but if it makes you feel any better, you can tell them what having a king will be like.”

So Samuel did. He called the people together and said, “You want a king?”

“Yes!”

“You want someone who will have absolute authority over you, will take ten percent of your crops, will conscript your sons for his army and for slave labor to build his palaces, will take your daughters as bakers and perfumers and servants and concubines?”

“Well, we were thinking more of fighting the Philistines, but if that’s what it takes, yes.”

“You’re pathetic!” Samuel snapped. “Go home!”

Now some time after that, a young man from the tribe of Benjamin left his father’s farm, taking a servant with him, to look for some missing donkeys. The young man was named Saul, son of Kish. Saul was a head taller than most men, broad-shouldered, and handsome. He and the servant looked all over Benjamin, into the land of Ephraim, and back into Benjamin, but they found nothing. Saul suggested going home, but his servant said, “Let’s try one more thing. The next town is supposed to have a seer in it, someone who actually talks to God. Let’s go ask him.”

Saul agreed, and they went on to the next town, which was celebrating some kind of festival. A procession was forming, and the smell of a great feast was wafting down the hill. Saul and the servant fell into procession but as they came to the city gates, an old man stopped them, scowling at Saul. “You’re it, huh?”

“I beg your pardon?” Saul asked.

“At least you look the part. Come on. You’re to eat at my table for the feast.”

“I think you have us confused with someone else. We’re looking for the seer, and –”

“I’m the seer. My name’s Samuel, and God told me last night you were coming.”

“Look, sir. Samuel. We just want to ask –”

“Your father’s donkeys were found three days ago. Come on. You have more important things to deal with. You’re to deliver Israel from its enemies.”

“Um, no I’m not. I’m a Benjaminite, from the smallest tribe in Israel. I’m nobody.”

Samuel nodded. “Excellent. That’s better than I expected. Come eat.”

So they ate the feast together and stayed overnight at Samuel’s place. The next morning at dawn, Samuel escorted them both to the gate, then sent the servant on ahead. When he was gone, Samuel turned to Saul. “Kneel.”

“What?”

“I said, kneel! Are you always this dense?” Saul knelt, and Samuel produced a horn filled with oil and poured it over his head. “Rise, Saul. You are to be Israel’s king.”

“King? No. No no no no no, and no. No. No. You’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong,” Samuel said. “You want proof?” He looked into Saul’s eyes and frowned. “When you leave here, you’ll meet two men coming to tell you that the donkeys have been found. After that you’ll meet three men by the oak of Tabor, one carrying goats, another carrying bread, and the third carrying wine. And then . . .” Samuel hesitated.

“Then what?”

“Then . . . then a spirit . . . of God, maybe? . . . will enter you and you’ll fall into a . . . you’ll prophesy.”

“That’s crazy,” said Saul.

“Sounds like it, doesn’t it? We’ll see,” said Samuel. Saul left, dazed and frightened. His fear grew stronger when, a little later, two men from home came to him saying, “There you are! Your father’s looking for you! The donkeys are already home!” Just as Samuel had said. But that could have been a coincidence.

Shortly thereafter he met three men, and again as Samuel had said, one had goats, one had bread, and the third had wine. Finally, as he neared home, he came upon a band of wandering prophets, chanting and singing. Now this wasn’t as unusual then as it would be now. In the Ancient Near East – as, in fact, for most of human history – wandering holy men pronouncing prophecies were a known phenomenon. But Saul, seeing the third part of Samuel’s prediction approach, was terrified. As he watched, something like a gray fog seemed to steal between his eyes and the world around him. He managed to croak, “No!” and then the next thing he knew, the men from home were shaking him awake. “Saul? What happened? You were shouting and singing and tearing your clothes! We thought you’d gone mad!” Saul shook his head and said, “Nothing. Let’s go home.”

Samuel wasted no time. Summoning all the tribes, especially the various clans of Benjamin, to the ancient council ground at Mizpah, he declared to the Israelites that God had chosen a king. “Saul! Son of Kish, from the tribe of Benjamin! Come forth to your people! . . . I say, Saul! Son of Kish! . . . I saw him here earlier. Hey! Saul!”

A voice from the edge of the crowd called out, “I think I found your king! He’s hiding under the bags by the donkeys!”

Several hands grasped Saul and dragged him before the people. Samuel gritted his teeth, but he announced again, “Behold, Saul! Your king!”

Despite Saul’s reluctance, many nodded grudging approval. At least this tall, handsome man *looked* royal. Others remained skeptical, though. Saul said nothing for a long time until at last he muttered, “Fine. All right. I’ll be king. So what do I do now?”

Samuel scowled. “You’re king. You do whatever you want.”

“I want to go home,” said Saul. So he went home.

It was only a month later, though, when Nahash, the king of the Ammonites – across the Jordan River – laid siege to an Israelite city in that land, the city of Jabesh-Gilead. The city was surrounded, out of food and water, and the elders of the city realized they had to surrender or die. But the Ammonite king laughed at them. “Tell you what, I’ll accept your surrender only if you let me gauge out the right eye of every man, woman, and child!” Not surprisingly, the elders of Jabesh-Gilead decided to look for other options. They sent out messengers, hoping at least one might get through the siege. One did. He got across the Jordan and came to the land of Benjamin, where a tall young man was plowing a field. “What’s the matter?” the plowman asked. “You look awful!” The messenger explained what was happening across the Jordan at Jabesh.

The young man was still for a long moment, and the messenger started to move on, but the young man grabbed his arm. “Wait. Here’s what I want you to do.” He gave the messenger instructions to go throughout the land, recruiting further messengers as he went, summoning all the people to meet him at the town of Bezek.

The messenger hesitated. “Yes, but who shall I say –?”

“Tell them their king commands their presence! King Saul. Now go!”

Scripture says that the fear of the Lord fell on Israel, and a huge army gathered to the rendezvous. Saul led them across the Jordan, crushed the Ammonites, and freed Jabesh-Gilead. It was Saul’s first act as king and his finest hour. Israel came together again, singing King Saul’s praises. “At last! At last! This was what we wanted! A king, like all the other nations!”

The next years were years of constant battle for King Saul, as he struggled not only against Israel’s enemies, especially the Philistines on the coast, but also to maintain control over his people and his army. Israel had asked for a king, you see, but they hadn’t really listened to Samuel’s description of what that entailed. They had always been a confederacy of separate tribes, and though Saul was, in theory, the king of all Israel, only his own tribe showed unfailing loyalty. The Benjaminites formed the core of his army, and all his generals and greatest warriors were from his own tribe.

Years passed. As Saul got over his reluctance and grew more accustomed to being king, he gave commands with more authority, and he punished disobedience with more severity. And sometimes that gray mist would return, and during those times, Saul never knew exactly what he had done. His generals learned to keep an eye on their king, and to get out of his sight when one of his fits possessed him. Only two men were safe from Saul during these rages: the old prophet Samuel and Saul’s beloved oldest son, already becoming a respected warrior and leader, Jonathan.

Over those years, Samuel learned to love Saul. For all the Benjaminite's hesitancy at first and despite his unpredictable rages, Saul had always shown proper respect for the Lord and for Samuel. Before he went into battle, Saul always dedicated the victory to God and had Samuel offer a sacrifice on behalf of Israel. One day, though, just before a battle with the Philistines, Samuel was late. Saul fumed and fretted, and at last, with a peevish shout called out, "Am I king or am I not? Bring me the sacrifice! I'll do it myself!" The people hesitated. Samuel *always* did that part. "What are you waiting for? I gave you a command, didn't I? God made me king, didn't he? Well, unless you want the wrath of God to fall on you, you'll do what I say! Remember, I'm God's chosen one! I speak for the Lord!"

From a hill nearby – near enough to hear every word – the approaching Samuel watched, his heart heavy. "God?" he said. "Isn't this what I was afraid of? The people wanted a king like every other nation, and now they've got one. And I see only heartache and grief ahead."

And God answered, "Yes, this hasn't worked out so well. I am sorry that I chose Saul as king. I'll have to find someone else now."

Samuel shook his head. "But won't this just happen again? When you give a man that kind of power, you give him the seeds of his own destruction. Where are you going to find a man who can rule over a nation without his heart becoming hard and proud? Is such a thing even possible? A king with the heart of God?"

But this time God was silent, which very often is God's way of saying, "Watch and see."