

“The great and terrible mistake”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 and 1 Samuel 8:4-20*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

You know you’re in trouble when you start saying, “But everyone’s doing it!” and your mama (and in this case, I guess Samuel is your mama) says, “Well, if everyone was jumping off a bridge, would you do that too?” You can’t argue with that, unless of course you are in fact willing to jump off a bridge—which is the one fatal flaw in mama’s logic. She’s assuming we are rational beings, not idiots. She is often wrong.

In today’s story, the people come to Samuel, their leader, and say: things have got to change. They want a king. Why? So that they can be “like other nations.” So that they can have all the cool stuff that other nations do: armies and palaces and everything that would make them feel important. They want the nice clothes, and the big house, and the fleet of cars that all the rich kids have on the other side of town. Unfortunately, they’re not thinking about what those rich kids had to do to get all that stuff, and who they had to step on to get it, and what they might have lost in the exchange.

Samuel tries to warn them. They don’t listen. They demand a king, and so a king is what they get: the very first king of Israel.

This is the moment that changes everything. This is the great and terrible mistake.

History is littered with turning points like this one. Caesar crossing the Rubicon. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria. Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The church’s choice to cover up abuse. The decision to exclude a majority of Americans (Black, women, and poor) from the phrase “We the People.”<sup>1</sup> If you could go back and change these moments, history might be very different.

This is that moment for Israel.

This is *Game of Thrones* before George R.R. Martin, before HBO. Who will sit on the Iron Throne?

The answer was supposed to be nobody... at least nobody human.

You see, something audacious happened under Moses. He didn’t just lead the people out of slavery. He created an entirely new kind of community, driven by an entirely new understanding of God, such that the sins of the past—the oppression of Egypt and its so-called gods—would not be repeated. At least this is the argument of noted Hebrew scholar and author Walter Brueggemann.

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<sup>1</sup> Thurgood Marshall identifies this decision as one that “laid a foundation for the tragic events which were to follow.”

He contends that the god you believe in is the society you make. Believe in a totalitarian god, a god of order and power whose will always aligns with Pharaoh, then that's the kind of society you get. But believe in a free, loving God, you get a free and loving people. Brueggemann writes, "If a God is disclosed who is free to come and go, free from and even against the regime, free to hear and even answer slave cries, free from all proper 'godness' as defined by the empire, then it will bear decisively upon sociology because the freedom of God will surface in the brickyards and manifest itself as justice and compassion."<sup>2</sup>

The goal for Moses was to create a society that resembled the nature of God, with God at its helm. Not a king, not a pharaoh, not a slaver, but a Liberator. According to Exodus and Leviticus, this was supposed to be a community where everyone had enough—never too much, never too little. A community where people took care of each other, where poverty didn't reduce people to slavery, where everyone had a voice and was free to make choices.

It was never meant to be "like other nations." It was meant to be different. And the glue that would hold it all together was this mysterious, expansive God.

Of course, it was flawed from the beginning. We've read for ourselves some of the violent and patriarchal laws of that time. The people, while made in the image of God, were still human. They grumbled in the desert, sought false gods, and made war. And even a free people still needed leaders. "The period of Israel's judges was a time of great confusion and conflict."<sup>3</sup>

It was imperfect, but as long as they had that vision in front of them, as long as they aspired to something better, as long as they served a transcendent God, there was hope.

There was hope for more than 200 years.

But hope is hard. Do you remember when the Israelites are being led by Moses through the desert, and the people are afraid, because they're being asked to trust in a God they can't understand and a future they can't see, and how they cry, "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"? They want to go back to the way things were.

Isn't this the danger for us all—that when the going gets tough, we revert to old habits? We fall back on the anger, or the overeating, or the overworking, or the cheating, or the buying, or the prejudices that we've tried so hard to overcome—because at least they're familiar.

We do it all the time with our faith. We see the church dwindling, and so we sacrifice God's countercultural gospel in order to become "relevant." We stop saying things that rock the boat, take down that "Black Lives Matter" sign, shut the Bible, tone down that Jesus talk, anything to make people comfortable. We want a big church too, so we submit to charismatic leaders—kings—who promise great solutions, and then fly around in private jets, or cover up abuse, or propagate theologies of exclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Prophetic Imagination," Second Edition, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Doug Bratt

This is how democracy dies. We get scared, and we abandon the grand experiment and fall back on something far older: authoritarianism, racial and class divisions, leaders whom we can follow blindly in exchange for security and prosperity.

We revert to what we know, and what Israel knew was Pharaoh. So they adopted a king. They became an empire, the very thing they had escaped.

Samuel warns them: “He will take your sons... He will take your daughters... He will take the best of your fields.” He will tax you, conscript your labor, draft your children into war, consolidate his power, and grow the gap between the rich and the poor—and you will thank him, because you will think he is keeping you safe. And when it’s too late, “you will be his slaves.”

And that is precisely what happens. Saul becomes a terrible king. David has another man killed so that he can take his wife. Solomon levies heavy taxes, creates a standing army which answers to him alone, silences prophets, and forces people into mass labor projects. God is forgotten.

It works, for a while. Scripture says, “Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy” (1 Kings 4:20-23). But not everyone shared in this wealth, and after a series of bad kings, poverty grew. Judah and Israel, the two nations of God, turned on each other, in war, until Assyria conquered them, their people killed or sent into exile, putting them right back where they started.

The great and terrible mistake was to give up hope, and supplant God with a human king, a unilateral power, for the sake of success and security. They subordinated God, until he became a lackey who never deviated from the status quo, never asked you to do hard things, whose favor could be bought with spare offerings, who didn’t hear the cries of the oppressed (because the king didn’t).

The good news is that the God of the Exodus and the God of Jesus is not so easily deterred. God remains God. Even when the people come to God and say, “We don’t want you anymore, we want a king,” God remains God and says, “That’s your choice. I am a free God of a free people, and I will not take that from you.” Twice God says to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people.” God is democratic even when democracy calls for a king! Now that’s commitment!

And centuries later, God takes this broken royal line and restores hope with a new kind of king. This king led no armies, raised no palaces, accrued no wealth. He danced, and he grieved, and he helped people. He challenged and rocked the boat and asked us to do hard things, but never coerced; he always said it was our choice. And he loved us—not because of our usefulness but because of our existence.

That shepherd—that carpenter, that foot washer—faces us now. He frees us from the mistakes of the past, and he calls us to be his royal priesthood, his holy nation, God’s own people. We aren’t supposed to be like other people. We are supposed to be God’s alternative vision, a living contrast that challenges the world: a free people worshipping and working together, even when it’s hard, even when it’s scary, loving each other because God loves us—not just the kings, but all of us, priests, bearers of the divine fire, criers of justice, living stones of a better tomorrow. **Amen.**