

## **The Problem with Kings**

1 Samuel 8:1-22a

Rev. John Allen

Over the next several weeks, I am planning a series of sermons which I offer to help us prepare our minds, our hearts, and our spirits, for the upcoming election.

I know from my conversations with many of you that this upcoming election is a source of anxiety and unease.

I know from my conversations with many of you that the fractious political climate of this moment has created painful rifts with neighbors, friends, and family.

I know from my conversions with many of you, how tired and exhausted this topic can make you feel. All of us are already on the receiving end of a torrent of discourse about this election. From news networks, to robo-calls, to fundraising texts and emails, to social media, to our dining tables. There is no shortage of messages—and messaging, perspective, punditry, and spin.

I beg your forgiveness if the last thing you need is to hear one more person's thoughts on politics. But there are a few things I feel I must say.

And that is because I have noticed—and perhaps you have too—that one overarching question that seems overlayed on the political discourse of this moment is about faith, and it is about our faith: Christianity.

I see our nation wrestling with this question: what is the appropriate relationship between faith and public life, and more specifically, what is the appropriate relationship between Christianity and America, between our call as followers of Jesus, and our duties as citizens.

And if *that* conversation is to take place. We need to be a part of it.

So that will be the organizing question of my sermons over the next few weeks.

What does it mean to be both a Christian and a Citizen? And how can we hold both identities with integrity in this moment?

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Back to the time of Samuel, when Israel was ruled by a system of judges. Best we can tell, this period of time involved a somewhat loose federation of local systems of justice and organization. Several tribes and clans, with devotion to a common God, but who ordered their lives with each other on a pretty local basis.

It works ok, but it is also a system with a lot of opportunities for corruption and incompetence to make life difficult. And the people also grow concerned that if they were every to be attacked by one of the many empires emerging in their midst, it could be difficult to organize an effected defense.

In short, the people are losing faith in the existing institutions of their government. They want to try something else. Something which seems to work well in other places.

“Give us a king!” the people cry out. “Give us a king, so we can be like other nations.”

This makes Samuel sad, and he goes to God, who is very parental in this moment.

God says to Samuel: “solemnly warn them what a king will be like...but if they still want a king, then give them one.” Sometimes it seems, God decides to just let us learn our lesson.

And the people do not relent in their calls, and so they get a king. And that is where we stopped reading today, but suffice it to say, the community continues to struggle, and enters a new era which is filled with its own hardships and challenges.

And that community learns the lesson that has been learned by countless human communities throughout history. That in times of crisis, it is so tempting to place inordinate power into the hands of a single strong leader, and yet what we learn again and again is that doing to is ultimately an intolerable risk.

This is the problem with kings.

It does not need to even be a moral failing, or incapacity on the part of the king. Every human being is unfit to hold unchecked power. The scope of our imagination is too limited. The temptation for self-regard is too great.

Reinhold Niebuhr a theologian and ethicist who was active during the rather eventful span from 1920s to the 1960s said it this way:

“Our capacity for justice makes democracy possible. Our capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

Or if we want to reach back a little deeper into our theological history, John Calvin, the reformer of the 1620s said it this way:

“It may be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and if one asserts himself unfairly, ...restrain his willfulness.”

This is what we might call the “classical Christian defense of democracy” and also a sort of realism, that does not claim democracy provides a pathway to utopia, but asserts that it does offer at least the opportunity to resist intolerable injustices.

And it emerges from one of the great insights of our faith which is a realistic appraisal of human nature. Our faith reminds us both that we are ‘made in the image of God—God’s beloved and cherished children’ and our faith also reminds us that we are also by our nature prone sin, that we are inclined to act carelessly and harmfully, to think too much of ourselves and too little of others.

Holding these two truths together, calls us structure institutions—like our government—in a way that can both draw on the widest range of gifts among us, and constrain the worst impulses of each of us.

In many ways we find ourselves in a moment now, not unlike Israel did at the tail end of the time of judges. Collectively losing our confidence in existing institutions, and perhaps tempted to try to identify a political leader unto whom we can pin our hope for the future.

And there is also a troubling temptation emerging in this moment from some who share our Christian faith, an effort to try to elevate this particular faith to a unique place in our civic life, to compel civic institutions to display the sacred texts of this faith, or to make laws for our pluralistic society by appealing to the teachings of this one tradition.

This is a profound failure of religious humility. And it is damaging to both our civic life, but also damaging to our faith, to conflate the two.

Miroslav Volf is a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School and the Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Public Life.

His book: “A Public Faith” catalogues a list of what he called “malfunctions” of faith. He names what I have been discussing here as the: “malfunction of coerciveness,” that is the impulse of a faith to try to impose its values oppressively on an unwilling culture.

But somehow I doubt that this is what most tempts this crowd.

But he names another malfunction, the malfunction of idleness.

This is the place to which we often retreat when we do not want to be perceived as coercive Christians. When we want to be sure that we are properly differentiated from those faith is and politics are becoming unduly conflated.

And so—lest others think we are making too much of our faith—we decide to limit the reach of our faith to a small personal sphere of life, and let the God that we experience in this place shape our private life, or maybe our family life, but not our life as citizens.

This is an overcorrection. And this is the issue which I think we are most liable to fall into.

A robust and functioning democracy—one that is capable on helping us to collectively address the enormous challenges that confront us—depends on all of us finding a balance.

Avoiding the temptation to use our faith coercively, with undue regard for our own traditions and values.

But also avoiding the temptation to withdraw those traditions and values entirely from our engagement with the broader culture and world.

Returning to Samuel. And his conversion with God. God says something quite striking.

"For they have not rejected you," God says to Samuel: "but they have rejected me from being king over them."

When the people cry out for a king, God experiences it as a rejection. A failure of the people to put their trust where it belongs: in God.

Putting our trust in God is what will allow us to find a stable footing in whatever lies ahead. And I expect that this unfolding question of the appropriate place of this faith in the public life of this nation is not going away anytime soon.

Remember that we are not the authors of creation. God is. We do not hold the future in our hands. God does.

No one of us, and no one who puts themselves forward to lead us, has all the right answers.

By putting our trust in God, we can let go of the temptation to coerce others into our way

And by putting our trust in God we can develop the confidence to let the voice of our faith speak clearly as a part of a broader conversation.

Our faith invites us to democracy, because we know that in any moment, any person, might be the voice through which God is speaking.

Our faith invites us to democracy, because each of us are at time tempted to believe that our own way is the right way.

Our faith calls us to democracy, because of human tendencies that need to be restrained.

And our faith calls us to democracy, because all people bear gifts from God. Gifts that we should want to honor, and receive.