

SERMON NOTES — June 9, 2024

1 Samuel 8 portrays a transition time in Israel's history, around 1025 BCE, when they moved from being an indigenous people toward a monarchy that might enslave others. Quick recap:

- Born as an indigenous enslaved people in Egypt (1400 BCE?)
- Moses and Yahweh God free them from slavery
- They enjoy a time of egalitarian freedom in their tribes, sometimes under “judges” who help them in disputes with ‘neighbors’
- In 1025 they insist on a king

God through Samuel gives them an incredibly honest response. Choosing a king, a “strong man” authoritarian rule, will mean:

- A good portion of the nation will be conscripted to forced labor to support the war machine
- A good portion of the nation's wealth will also be taken to feed the war machine — and to support the wealthy life style of the king, his officers, and his “courtiers” (like the oligarchs of modern Russia?)

The people of Israel still choose the “strong man” authoritarian rule. Does this seem eerily familiar to the choice we may be making in November? We have spent 248 years moving away from kingship, toward an ever-increasing egalitarian government — featuring a brilliant three-branch structure of checks and balances. But many fellow citizens seem willing to give it up — “Christian Nationalists,” chief among them — in order to follow a strong man rule to achieve their goals.

The Gospel Reading relates Jesus speaking a parable against “strong man” rule, connecting it to Satan. First, a quick recap of the 1000+ years between 1 Samuel 8 and Jesus:

- There first kingship under Saul falters
- From 1000-920 BCE, Kings David and Solomon lead Israel to the closest they ever come to being a major empire
- The nation splits after that, and 100 years later they begin to be an indigenous people under the reign of other empires: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, several smaller ones, and then the Romans — 800 years of having others strong man kings rule them!

There's two basic choices for a people with such a long history of being an oppressed indigenous people:

- Keep thinking in the same terms of kingship, hoping that a king will arise among you to turn the table on your overlords;
- Or starting thinking in a new way with a very new politics

Jesus presents us with the latter, with a much clearer picture both theologically and anthropologically:

- Regarding God (theology), Jesus sees their God as being in support of them precisely as an indigenous people, freeing them from slavery in Egypt; and then after their mistake of choosing a king, sending them prophets with a continuing vision for true justice and peace
- Regarding humanity (anthropology), he shows us our true stripes as a species who has always relied on scapegoats, on finding our unity as a group by being over against enemies and seeking to cast them out — resulting in a human household always divided against itself

Examples of “Satan casting out Satan”

- In this story, the scribes from Jerusalem think they are doing God's work by naming Jesus as in league with Satan and seeking to cast him out — which they will succeed in doing at the crucifixion
- Are Christian Nationalists in this same category? They see themselves as doing God's work — signaled by their flag “An Appeal to Heaven” — by choosing a strong man leader to help them cast out their enemies.



Jesus gives us the true alternative to a politics based on retribution: a politics based on forgiveness and restoration, on equality and working for the common good by working for God's justice for the most vulnerable. The strong man is bound up by the indigenous crucified man. Resulting in God's household finally becoming united. St Paul says it this way: “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” (Eph 2:14-15)

Post-sermon examples of the dangers of strong man authoritarian rule:

- Martin Niemöller's words in Nazi Germany: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.”
- Watch a series like *Man in the High Castle* — a show which depicts an alternate history of Hitler developing the A-bomb first and winning the war. I give a strong caution for the intense violence of American life under fascist rule. One example of pitfalls: the man in charge of America has a great life until his son gets sick and is eliminated.