

Sermon: Introducing Samuel – prophets & kings

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church 3 June 2018

Bible Readings Mark 2:23-28 1 Samuel 8:1-10, 19-22

I have a confession to make. I have developed an obsession. I have become a little too absorbed by the drama of the US Presidency and the unfolding crises week by week. I'm now on first name terms with the various analysts and reporters. I know the names of White House lawyers and aides and the intricacies of legal processes that really are none of my business but are bizarrely fascinating. I'm learning more about what happened with President Nixon and what American presidents can and cannot do. Who knew they could just randomly pardon people, even if no pardon has been asked for?

Over the last two weeks we have learned the name of a bishop, one Michael Curry. He burst onto our TV screens in a moment none of us expected – a black gospel preacher preaching it with verve and passion at a British royal wedding. He made the news again the following week for a very different reason. He and long-time Christian social justice leader, Jim Wallace, co-led a march on Washington last week.

Their press release begins:

We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian's first loyalty, above all others.

The issues facing America, and the deep division that faces the church there, cut to the heart of the source of authority. While they all agree that Jesus is Lord, Christians struggle with how to relate to other sources of authority in the world, especially when some claims of authority seem so utterly at odds with the principles of Jesus.

This is not a new problem. A lot of the Bible is about this very problem. Especially the section of the Bible that we here at Cashmere are embarking on this Sunday, which is the books of 1st and 2nd Samuel.

So the first thing I need to say is to ask you to read these books. They are as well written as the most gripping novel, so it's not difficult. These are not dull or dry chapters. If you'd like to borrow a pew Bible, go right ahead. Fine with me if you never bring it back, so long as you read it!

We are going to work through 1 and 2 Samuel during June and July, following the Lectionary. Along the way we will encounter fascinating characters: a woman struggling with fertility, a dynamic spirit-filled leader, a petulant spiteful king, an over-sexed ambitious fighter. We will glimpse their inner struggles and outer battles. Along the way are promises and betrayals, affairs and assassinations, charismatic worship and international politics.

The books of Samuel form a bridge between two eras: Before Samuel the 12 tribes of Israel were autonomous entities, with no central place of worship or government. This could have continued but for the serious threat posed by an invading army, with far advanced weaponry – the Philistines pushing in from the coast. To survive, the Israeli

tribes had to forge a joint army, and that required a common leader – a King. Never had a King before.

By the end of 2 Samuel they have themselves a King, and the Philistines are defeated. Israel has a capital city, and the beginnings of palace and temple. With military victory comes financial gain, and with money comes technology. Israel emerges from the Bronze age and enters the Iron age.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are essential reading for Christians first and foremost because Jesus is heir to David. Jesus himself made connections between himself and King David, as we heard in our reading from Mark this morning. Jesus was himself, through his adopted father Joseph, a descendent of David. And most importantly, Jesus spoke about his kingdom, God's kingdom, in the light of David's kingdom, as heir to David's line, as fulfillment of prophecies given to David, as carrying forward the covenant promise that God made with David. As David was anointed as King, so Jesus is the anointed one, which is the literal meaning of Messiah, Anointed.

Let's pause look for a moment at the Mark story. It's a curious little quote from Jesus. Jesus is being challenged about his behavior on the Sabbath. What Jesus said in his defence was far more outrageous and inflammatory than picking a few seed-heads. The real issue for Jesus is not the rules themselves but the very foundations of authority. It is about the source of authority. Jesus says: *'The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath'*. Wow. what a statement.

And his Biblical parallel? He reminds them that David took some holy bread for his men to eat, bread that had been dedicated to God, altar bread, bread which only priests should have eaten. You can read up on the story in chapter 21 (1 Samuel 21).

I've been trying to get my head around the significance of the David story ... but to be honest it's still a bit beyond me.

What is obvious from this little quote from Jesus is that the stories about King David were highly valued in Jesus' time, and that Jesus himself saw a continuity between David and himself. This shapes how Jesus saw the source of his own authority. I hope that over the next couple of months we can unpack some of this.

Back to Samuel. 1 Samuel 8 is a fascinating argument about authority and kingship. The prophet has been asked by the people to appoint a king. They want an army. They want victory! They want mana and prestige and they reckon having a king is the answer. God is not so sure. Samuel warns the people what is blatantly obvious to us: power corrupts. Too much power in one man's hands is a problem. Sure you may benefit, but you will pay the price.

The Bible is such a fascinating book because it bridges the spiritual and the political. It is history and it tells our own story back to us. I can't imagine a time when 1 Samuel 8 has been less relevant. You want a king – really??!! You want to hand power to one person – really??!! The prophet Samuel says to his people, as Jesus said to his people, God is Lord. God is the only true source of authority. Not rules, not armies, not Twitter. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

As we share this morning in Holy Communion we eat and drink of the body and blood of Jesus ... as a tangible sign, a spiritual action, of whose we are. We enter in a physical way into the Kingdom of God, we honour Jesus as our King. Jesus is Lord. No other authority can lay claim to us. We are in Christ, alive in him, through the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father, one God, to whom be all honour and power, now and forever, amen.