

CHANGING THE WAY WE LOOK AT THINGS

A sermon for June 10, 2018, by the Reverend Pam Laing
Third Sunday after Pentecost

A Reading: **1 Samuel 8:1-22**

'When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only -- you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.'

Gospel: **Mark 3:20-35**

'... and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' -- for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

At first glance, the issue about whether or not the Israelites should have a king does not seem to be pertinent for us who live in the U.S. today. We do not have a king; we live in a democracy that is designed to let its citizens have a say in the way we are ruled. Yet, we do live in a time when our government does not seem to be working very well. There is a lot of discussion and disagreement about which elected officials might best help get our nation back on track. Add to that the fact that many people now call themselves either '*spiritual but not religious*' or part of the '*nones*' who say they do not identify with any religion, and there might be more similarity between the times when Samuel was judge and today than we think. Like those in ancient Israel, we in our country today are feeling unsettled and are searching for answers that will bring us a greater sense of stability and certainty.

For the people of Israel, Samuel had been the symbol of safety and wellbeing. He had been the leader in Israel for a long time; his was recognized as the voice of God. Because Samuel was so closely connected to God, he wisely judged the people's affairs. He sought justice and equality for all the people and watched out especially for the poor and for those who were not accepted. Under Samuel's watch, the people had easily identified themselves as belonging to God and had felt honored to be called God's chosen people who were different from people in other nations.

Yet, Israel's situation was changing. As Samuel got older he could not travel around the nation as easily as he once had. He had tried to take up the slack by appointing his two sons as his assistants. Joel and Abijah had watched him as they grew up; and in the way of Jewish tradition, Samuel had groomed them to follow in his footsteps. But his intentions were not theirs. Joel and Abijah acted as judges only on the outside. On the inside they were spiritually corrupt. They shunned the godly values of their father, and operated more like members of the mafia, than as representatives of God. As the people suffered under the leadership of Samuel's sons, they began to long for the days when everything was easier and not so complicated. The memories in their minds painted the past as totally wonderful, and the fear welling in their hearts made a monster of the future that literally scared the trust right out of them.

The fact that the people went to Samuel shows some insight on their part. He had been the one who had helped them in the past, the one who connected them with God's ways, and who guided them in the way of truth. This time, though, they did not wait to listen for Samuel's godly insights. When they looked around and saw how all the other nations were strong and worldly, they decided it was time for them to move up in the ranks of nations. They wanted a king – one like all their neighbors had. A king would make them feel secure and more important. Even when God through Samuel warned them that they were ignoring the deep wound on the inside and merely putting a Band-Aid on the outside, the people still demanded their humanly concocted fix. God's way seemed slow and uncertain and they did not want to wait. Rather than listen to God's take on the situation, they created their own solution.

If we fast-forward to the time of today's gospel story, we see that people had not changed much over all those years. Many were again making the wrong choice. There Jesus was, the Son of God, standing in their midst, but they would not trust that he was sent by God to lead them into God's kingdom. Instead, they decided Jesus was crazy at best or at worst, that the devil had possessed him.

These two stories are good examples of how our God-given freedom sometimes allows us to make poor choices. God will not force us to do what is right. It is up to us to continually ask ourselves if we are truly listening for God's leading, and to also respond to that leading when God shows us the way.

One of C.S. Lewis' stories from his *Chronicles of Narnia* series illustrates how we need to listen and follow the path God sets before us: the Pevensie children are trying to reach Prince Caspian. In order to save time, they travel up Glasswater Creek, which they think is an easier route than the one the lion, Aslan, who is the God-figure in the series, has advised them to take. It turns out that the path they have chosen leads them to the enemy army. But always faithful, in the night, Aslan calls to Lucy, the youngest sister, and tells her they have lost time and they need to follow him. Lucy wakes up the rest – none of whom can see Aslan in the way she can. Her brothers and sister decide to trust Lucy's faith in Aslan and to follow her vision of where they should go. As they travel, each one eventually discovers along the way that they, too, can see Aslan, first in shadow and then in full view. Together, individually and collectively, they begin to follow Aslan on their own and to know they have chosen the right path.¹

Our plans often prove to be a waste of our time here on earth because they are driven by fear, anxiety, or impatience. In response to these emotions we focus on the exterior, surface part of life. As a result, we fail to catch God's sacred and grace-filled vision for us and for the world. Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthian church, reading from Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* "*Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us,*

on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

The underneath, eternal things that really matter often cannot be seen, but nevertheless they are working their way forward into an invisible future that is beyond our imagination. We may not get the big picture, but we do receive fleeting glimpses of what is much deeper than the eye can see. If we listen carefully to and for God’s word, we will be able to see the vision that brings God’s kingdom to earth.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, chapters 9-10