

The Rights (and Wrongs) of Kings

sermon digest

February 6, 2011

1 Samuel 8:4 - 9:2

Larry Dipboye

The Declaration of Independence that we celebrate every year on July 4th addresses King George III of England with a declaration, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The Declaration follows with a long list of complaints against the English throne over the abuse of power. Two hundred years later, President of Union Theological Seminary John C. Bennett made an interesting observation: "One little-noted fact in this bicentennial year is that our country, which was born in revolution, has been opposed to all recent revolutions and in most cases has tried to undermine them" (*Christian Century*, June 9-16, 1976, p. 561-64). He observed that the U.S. stood in opposition to revolutions of the last century in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam. He also noted that these were all communist revolutions. His concern? Opposition to communism was less significant than our support for tyrannical regimes that "care nothing about the freedom we prize."

Thirty-five years later, as we anxiously follow the cries of the people in Tunisia and Egypt reverberating in Kuwait and Jordan, what is your hope for oppressed people around the world? More important, what is their dream for a new day with a different way of life? For generations, we have been warned by pundits and experts about an approaching global revolution. An ever-expanding human population is colliding with limited natural resources. Is any form of government capable of meeting the human need, much less human wants and wishes?

Jesus told a story about the behavior of evil spirits. When the evil is cast out, it wanders the earth in search of a home and decides to check out the place it just left. Finding the life empty, the evil spirit returns with seven companions more evil than itself. So, Jesus concludes, "the last state of that person is worse than the first" (Mt. 12:45). That is always the danger of revolution. Casting out the evil spirit is never enough. An empty house is always an invitation for seven times worse evil than the one we fear.

Give the people what they want. According to the story in 1 Samuel, the people cried to Samuel, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel warned that a king will grasp at power and ownership of all property and will ultimately enslave the people. Sound familiar? The people responded, "We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations." God told Samuel to give the people what they *think* they want.

This was a revolution. Israel was run by judges who were little different from kings in power and authority over the people. Samuel was a judge. The problem was not with Samuel but with his sons. Samuel was aging, so he passed the mantle of government to his two sons. Samuel's sons had learned nothing from their father. They were greedy. They took bribes and perverted justice. (The word for *judge* is based on the word for *justice* in Hebrew as well as English.) Although the message to Samuel was that the people were opposing God not Samuel, you have to look at the issue at hand. Samuel's boys were a problem. The people wanted to clean the government house, but, like the story of Jesus, they invited a problem seven times worse than the one they had just solved.

This was an act of democracy. Saul did not take over the government by force of arms. Saul did not start a *coup de tat* to get rid of old Samuel so that he could get control of the nation. The people demanded a king. The word of God to Samuel was, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you." Give the people what they want even if what they want is worse than what they have. Saul was chosen. After all he was handsome and young and tall—head and shoulders above everyone else. Saul was ordained by Samuel. The rest is history, however disturbing and stormy.

In spite of the fact that King David became the messianic model whose family tree eventuated in Jesus of Nazareth, the decision to anoint a king proved to be a bad turn in history. The royals were supposed to be the governing voice of Jahweh, God of the Jews. They proved to be prone to all the ills that plague humanity—adultery, murder, stupidity, greed, arrogance.

Walter Brueggeman looks back on the history of the kings and charges Solomon, the third generation, with contradicting everything that Moses stood for. Solomon countered the economics of

equality with the economics of affluence, the politics of justice with the politics of oppression, the religion of God 's freedom with the religion of God's accessibility. Furthermore, he traded a vision of freedom for the reality of security, banished the neighbor for the sake of reducing everyone to servitude, replaced covenanting with consuming, and reduced promises to tradable commodities. (*The Prophetic Imagination*, pp 36-39).

The story in 1 Samuel was probably written after the Exile some four centuries after the events described. Monday morning quarterbacks always have a better view of the game than the ones on the field in the midst of the crisis. Historians always have an advantage over the actors on the stage of history about whom they write. The Deuteronomists reflected on the history of the kings of Israel and Judah with such notables as Ahab and Jezebel and saw a wrong turn in the road. When the people cried for a king so that they could be like other nations, they did not know what they were asking. More often than not, the kings of Israel and Judah were every bit as much a problem as the later regents of Persia, Greece, and Rome.

All human governments are human governments . To some extent the Jews were convinced that the problem was monarchy, yet they venerated King David as the model regent, and Christians traced the lineage of Jesus to David's house. Jesus came preaching the "kingdom of God." Somehow we cannot seem to get away from the idea of monarchy.

I was a seminary student living in Fort Worth when President Kennedy was shot down in Dallas a few miles away. Along with being pastor of a country church east of Dallas, I had a job in the TCU Library. We took our breaks in the faculty lounge of the library. I recall a conversation about the future of the nation under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson. Johnson was a notorious Texas politician with a shady history of fudging on elections. I was particularly outspoken about my fear of the future. I said something like, "Johnson is a politician in the worst sense of that word!" A history professor whose name escapes me decided to jump into the conversation at that point. He asked, "What better person could we have to lead our political system than a politician?" Nearly a half-century later I think I hear what he was saying. He certainly was not defending the virtue of President Johnson.

I think that he was registering in our young minds the real humanity of all governments and all government leaders. There is a connection to the strong insistence of Karl Barth that all religions, including Christian religions, are human inventions subject to human failure. What is true of religion is doubly true of government. There is indeed a problem with monarchy. Lord Acton was right: "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Governments like churches are run by human beings and anything humans touch is subject to corruption. We are victims of our own theological naivete. The perfect system of government does not exist, because government is always in the hands of corruptible human beings.

Avoid political idolatry. I set out today to make a case against monarchy. The ultimate message is that the people chose to worship an earthly king over a heavenly Father. The subtle interpretation that comes through to Samuel is that the people are not critical of you, they are critical of God. They prefer a tyrant they can see to an illusive God that cannot be cornered, housed, or grasped. The problem is not just political, i.e., which system of government is better than another, although I have an unabashed preference for democracy over monarchy. For the Jews, the whole issue revolved around the First Commandment, "you shall have no other gods before me." Monarchs are just exactly as Samuel describe them. They are corrupted by the lust for power to claim a place that belongs only to God.

But that very aspect of Jewish religion is even stronger in Islam. Why do people whose ultimate loyalty belongs only to God end up under the control of some petty little dictator? I encounter the same question in the study of monarchical religion. In times of economic crisis such as the Great Depression religious dictators have typically risen to power. In times of insecurity people find comfort in authoritarian leaders who will relieve them of the burden of thinking and choosing for themselves. We would prefer to have a demagogue whom we can later depose and damn to stepping up to the plate and take responsibility for our own destiny.

The ultimate answer is not in 1 Samuel. Here we find only the questions. But eventually a prophet emerged in Israel in the midst of the worst possible political situation to call the people to look to the

kingdom of God.