

## CHARACTER MEANS CHOOSING

### *A Time for Courage*

1 Samuel 8: Selected Verses

October 27, 2024

Before we turn to the words of 1 Samuel, some context will help set the stage. Ours and theirs. We, here at Second Church, are midway through a sermon series on choices that reflect and shape our character. In a contentious and often contemptuous time, we're exploring how we can put faith at the center of our decisions. These reflections are meant to lift the values and virtues we are called to embody. One of those virtues, it seems to me, is courage.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues. It is the form of every virtue at its testing point, which means at the point of highest reality."

To better understand this morning's scripture text, and how it fits this series, let's start with a little history. The Book of Exodus, you likely recall, begins with God's people, the Hebrew people, living as slaves in Egypt under the tyrannical rule of Pharaoh. Exodus is the story of liberation. God frees the people from their bondage. Moses leads them out of Egypt. And at long last, forty years later, his successor, Joshua, completes the journey and leads the people into the Promised Land. What follows there is not a time of peace and harmony, but of violence and bloodshed. During this era of uninterrupted conflict and war, the twelve tribes of the Hebrews are led by judges. My friend Scott Black Johnston says that these judges were like the sheriffs in old western movies. With a badge and a gun, they keep peace by imposing force. And, with very few exceptions that only prove the rule, things go very, very poorly under the rule of judges. In fact, by the end of the book, there is widespread idolatry under a collection of corrupt priests, and the tribes have turned their weapons on each other, warring with their own kin. You don't need me to connect the dots here.

The final verse of the Book of Judges summarizes the situation: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Enter Samuel. A change is coming. The time of the judges is ending. Samuel represents a pivot point. He is a bold reformer, a courageous prophet, a wise judge, a holy priest. But he is aging, and those coming after him are not worthy successors. The situation is fraught with risk, danger, and potential for chaos. The people have an idea. Listen for the word of God.

*[Read 1 Samuel 8]*

The elders approach Samuel, Hannah's son. Samuel, consecrated to God. Samuel, raised in the temple. Samuel, revered leader, righteous judge, respected prophet. Samuel, a voice for the Lord when God's word was rare. Samuel, a preacher who courageously told the truth in a time of lies. Samuel, a man of faith who has walked with God and is getting up in years.

With Samuel visibly diminishing right before their eyes and an uncertain future laid out before them, they corner Sam and make a demand.

***Give us a king!***

The request has the ring of urgency in the voices of the elders. Why? Why a king? The elders give Samuel two reasons. Both are morally bankrupt.

*First: so that we can be like other nations.* Really? Do they remember how this story started? Enslaved under Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Deep in the collective memory of God's people is the reality of what it is like to be ruled by a king. And yet, they ask Samuel for one of their own. They want to be like other nations.

*Second: the king will go out before us and fight our battles.* Really? The king will fight for you? Given the benefit of hindsight, we see the naivety in this expectation. The promise of a king who will fight on behalf of the people is never realized. Far more often, it is the tragic inverse. Ordinary citizens sent to carry out plans devised in halls of power far from the front lines where lives are risked and lost.

We see what is coming for our faith ancestors. This will not go well.

But before you judge, consider the rhetoric of our own political moment. Language lifting leaders who will “fight for you” is ubiquitous. This, it seems, is what we want, particularly when manufactured feelings of irrational fear provoke very real panic. We want someone to fight our battles, someone who will guarantee our safety, our security, our success. We want order. And yes, perhaps we’re willing to compromise conviction for the perception of protection.

### ***Give us a king!***

Samuel sees right through these flimsy arguments. He is displeased. He takes it to the Lord in prayer, and God’s answer to Samuel fascinates me. It comes in three parts.

First: *Samuel, they are rejecting me, not you.*

Second: *Give them what they are asking.*

Third: *But first, you must warn them.*

God recognizes the request as the latest in a long line of leaving behind the gift of divine call for the allure of human power. Just one more attempt to replace God on the throne with an idol of our own making. Still, determined to preserve the promise of freedom, God will not stand in their way. *Listen to the voice of the people.*

And so, Samuel does as they demand. But before he grants the request, this aging sage is given a moment with his people, this people he has led and loved for so long. He uses the moment to provide a preview of coming abominations.

*Do not be naïve, Samuel says. These are the ways of a king.*

He unfolds a series of predictions for what lies ahead. And the key word in each of them is the word *take*. The king will take. He will take, and he will take, and he will take. He will take your sons and your daughters. He will take your gifts and bend them to malicious purpose. He will take your fields and your vineyards and claim them as his own. He will take your dreams. And finally, he will take you.

Now, please understand. Samuel is not being dramatic or exaggerating the impact. This man has lived too long to mince words. What he describes is the lived reality of those ruled by authoritarian leaders. They take, and they take, and they take.

So, having heard the warning of God in the voice of Samuel, the people repent of their misguided demand and turn back to God. Right? Just kidding. Different story. No, their response shows both obstinance and ignorance. *We are determined to have a king over us.*

They have made their choice. The die is cast. The rule of kings is set to begin. In place of this transcendent mysterious God they cannot see, the people will have their rulers—concrete authority, visible displays of power, and a new set of battles to fight and enemies to vanquish. It will be just as Samuel warns. And it will not be long before the people will wish for a do-over. And none will be granted.

From this story, I draw three implications for people of faith in a time of consequential choosing.

*First, avoid the temptation to place **ultimate** hope in flawed instruments of human leadership.* Regardless of the leader in question, this is an act of idolatry because it puts a person in the place of God. Any candidate for any office who promises you salvation of any type is attempting to occupy a role they cannot fill. We must not worship our leaders. They are not saviors. They are servants.

*Second, look outside the formal structures of power for voices of prophetic wisdom.* Samuel is not king. He is

never elected or crowned. He has no formal power. And yet his is the voice God's people should follow. He possesses godly wisdom. He grounds his rhetoric in reverence. He speaks holy truth to worldly power. And he will not stop. This will be his role as the time of kings begins; it will be his role until the very end of his life. Friends, we must reject spiritual leaders whose voices are coopted by the promise of power in exchange for blessing. Instead, listen for the prophets of our day who, like Samuel, owe allegiance only to God.

*Finally and most importantly, this ancient story discloses the place of God in the affairs of nations and peoples.* When Samuel reports the demand of the elders, God is upset, God is uneasy, and ultimately God is acquiescent. Why does God relent?

This week I read the reflection of one commentator who suggested that God is a lot like a frustrated parent when a child insists over and over again on something they should not have. *Fine. Have it your way. Enjoy your king!*

Maybe. But it does seem to me there is deeper wisdom at work here. Just as we must not lift our leaders to divine status, so also we must not restrict the expansive power of God to the narrow constraints of human vision. The tragic trajectory of theocracy is to devolve into demonization of difference. They make God too small. When God tells Samuel to listen to the people, no matter how shortsighted or unwise their demand, it is an act of extraordinary divine restraint. God gives them what they want. And yet. God does not leave them behind. There may be a king on the throne, but God is in the midst. The king takes and takes and takes. And God keeps on giving. Manna in the wilderness. Rivers of water in the desert. Grace and mercy. In the courts of the king and on the streets of cities, God gives voice to prophets who seek justice, demand righteousness, who live with integrity in times of trouble, who speak truth through the veil of lies. Meanwhile, the monarchy stumbles its way forward. There are successes, and there are failures. There are wars, and there are building projects. There are better leaders and worse leaders. And in time, this kingdom itself will be overrun by the violent subjugation

of empire. Babylon. Rome. Powers who take authority by force. They will rule this people with an iron fist. And still, the people cry:

***Give us a king!***

The Romans hear them. And so, they mock this make-believe monarchy. A placard is nailed above the head of a crucified man. *King of the Jews*. Those words, intended for insult, tell a truth beyond all the lies of worldly rulers. *This is your king*. And, get this, he is not riding the war horse out to battle. He will not send you to slaughter. He is the one next to you. God in your midst. Do not forget that truth in the days ahead. Have courage, for your king has chosen the way of love, and you can too.