**"The Temptation of Power"**
A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – September 27, 2026
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Lesson: 1 Samuel 8:4-22

Loving God, may your comforting, compassionate, inspiring Spirit meet us here in this moment. We give thanks for your faithful presence among us in community, in our daily lives, and especially in our times of need. May we open our hearts to your inspiration this day. Amen.

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I know that Pastor Dave has been taking you on a journey through some of the foundational and influential stories of the Old Testament over the past couple of months. Today's lesson is one he chose for this sermon series as well.

As you've seen by now, one of the recurring ideas that keeps popping up throughout these stories is covenant. Covenant is, arguably, the primary theme of the Old Testament and is central to the faith tradition we have inherited. What kind of covenantal relationship is God still inviting us into, with God's self and with one another? How has God demonstrated a deep commitment to this covenant? And how do we, as human beings, live faithfully into this relationship? These stories of our tradition have staying power because the questions they ask of us are still deeply relevant to us.

So, today we meet the prophet Samuel later on in his life. And he has been a faithful prophet, a just judge, and a good leader among his people. But now he has a problem. He has appointed his two sons to be judges, and unfortunately, they are not doing a very good job. In fact, the verse right before today's reading tells us that Samuel's sons "did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." (1 Samuel 8:3)

So, when the elders of Israel approach Samuel to plead for a king, we should bear in mind that they *do* have some legitimate concerns. Things are not going so well. Their desire for a change is understandable. And they think that a new leader, a king, will solve their problems. Plenty of other nations have kings, why not us?

Now Samuel does *not* like this request. And when he prays to God, it becomes clear that Samuel is taking this as a personal rejection of him, his leadership, and his household. God, however, answers him by saying, "this isn't a rejection of you, Samuel, this is a rejection of me and my sovereignty." "And, by the way Sam, I've been dealing with this since the day we left Egypt. Sigh."

Remember the Golden Calf incident? It's not explicitly mentioned here, but it's implied. It seems that part of God's concern is that the elders are making an idol of this fantasy king who they imagine will sweep in like a superhuman superhero and save them from their daily struggles and their internal conflicts; who will defeat their enemies and ensure their security. It also seems that God is concerned that they are unwittingly sliding back into the ways of Pharaoh's Egypt where concentrated power and exploitation was the mode of operation, rather than shared covenantal responsibility and relationship.

Just like when they were first brought out of Egypt, God was still inviting them into an entirely different and distinctive way of life. Could monarchy and covenantal living coexist? Or would a king of Israel simply be prone to the same temptations to consolidate power and wealth and succumb to the same moral failures of other monarchs? We're already seeing Samuel's own sons struggle to do their job faithfully and justly. Would a monarchy just compound the problem and make this worse? How would a king be held accountable?

God rightly perceives that the elders are romanticizing and idealizing this fantasy king. And so, God tells Samuel to give them a healthy (and kind of harshly frank) dose of reality. So, Samuel reports God's warning to the elders:

"You want a king? This is what a king will do. He'll amass an army and call up your sons to be his soldiers, farmers, and weapons manufacturers. Your daughters will have to go work for the king too – cooking, baking, and making perfume for the royal court. The point it this: the fruit of your children's labor will not belong to them; it will belong to the king. And if you think you're going to hang onto your family farms, vineyards, and orchards, think again. The king is going to take your best land and a tenth of your remaining produce and goods and give it all to his wealthy friends. It will be gone. A tenth of your sheep too. Your slaves, cattle, and donkeys will all be reassigned to the king's service. In fact, you will *all* become slaves to the king. And when all of this happens (and you're miserable), it's going to be too late for you to cry out to God. If this is the path you choose, you're going to have to live with it."

How will the elders respond to this warning?

"Nah, we still want a king." I can just imagine poor Samuel rolling his eyes and throwing his hands up in exasperation. Being a prophet in ancient Israel was not an easy gig!

At this point, God gives in. "Okay. If you still want a king, we'll get you a king. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Maybe a monarchy was an inevitable part of their evolution. Maybe ancient Israel had to learn the hard way that a king couldn't fix all of their personal and social problems or ensure their survival and security. No individual political leader *can* do all that. It's tempting to think that if we can just get the right leader in power, all will be well. But we know life together is more complicated than that. It was for them. It is for us.

As it turned out, ancient Israel would hang onto their new unified, independent monarchy for only a few generations. Much larger and more powerful empires would rise up around them over time, defeat those in power, and eventually fall. History has demonstrated time and again that human power is limited and temporary.

Also, if the elders who called for a king were hoping to be let off the hook from their obligations, this new monarchy wouldn't excuse them from their covenantal responsibilities. The call to them and their people to collectively live into their covenantal relationship still applied. The monarchy didn't ultimately dismantle the covenant. Though it *did* test it at times. The people

endured injustice and exploitation, as God had warned. And it was the prophets (starting with Samuel) who helped hold the kings accountable and who also called all of the people back to their covenantal responsibilities. Without the witness and work of the prophets, the covenantal faith of ancient Israel might not have endured.

We can be grateful that the biblical texts deal rather candidly with the legacy of the kings of ancient Israel. Think about it; they could have written a different story. They could have said here are our kings; here's all the good stuff they did for us; the end (and glossed over all of the icky stuff). But that would have been dishonest.

Instead, the stories of the kings contain plenty of political and interpersonal drama, violence, and imperfect people. It's kind of like Game of Thrones. And the failures, mistakes, and immoral decisions of Israel's kings are on full display at times. Remember when David had his general Uriah killed in battle so he could take his wife Bathsheba for himself? That was a biggie! And David was the golden boy! But he was sure far from perfect. Thankfully, Nathan the prophet was right there to call him on it.

In addition to the temptation of political power, I also think that the elders of Israel were dealing with the temptation of permanence. Maybe they just wanted to feel settled. Beneath their desire for security is very real existential angst and uncertainty.

I'm not judging them. It's hard to always be a work in progress (individually and collectively). It's hard to navigate changing circumstances. It's hard to come to terms with our own vulnerability and finitude. And it's hard to be in dynamic relationships with others sometimes – especially when there are interpersonal conflicts or people aren't living up to their end of the deal (like Samuel's sons). So, it's understandable that they wanted stability, reliability, and good leadership. We can relate to those desires.

But a monarchy would not bring them permanence. And, at some point, perhaps they will have to come to accept the dynamic nature of life in community. And maybe they will learn that the faithful response to feelings of insecurity, instability, and uncertainty is not to grasp harder for permanence or to give over all of the power and expectation to one leader; but instead, to invest in relationship, to invest in shared community, and to respond daily to the covenantal call to love God and love our neighbors.

There's no quick fix. Covenantal community is always a work in progress. And feelings of uncertainty may not magically evaporate. And, even when they fade, they might come back again.

But the fruits of covenantal community are substantial. And though they might not always be permanent, they are deeply meaningful, transformative, durable, and resilient. Support and compassion when we need it. Mutual work toward more just and peaceful ways of living together. Real, practical help in times of need. Concrete experiences of being seen, loved, and buoyed up by others who care about us. Meaningful opportunities to serve others and help them feel seen, loved, and buoyed up. This is the good stuff. And it's not the job of one leader. It's

our shared vocation. Teamwork makes the dreamwork, as they say. And we have some great team members right here in this room!

And the eternal love of God is what undergirds, sustains, inspires, empowers, and makes this work possible. That is where we ought to place our trust. God has invested in this relationship. God is much more interested in communion with all creation than in kingmaking. And God is still always inviting us faithfully into covenant.

And yes, we need good, shared leadership at various levels of our collective life. But maybe we don't need more kings. Maybe we don't need to play the game of thrones anymore. Maybe we ought to listen more deeply to the wisdom of the prophets, both past and present. Maybe we ought to keep exercising our own prophetic muscles, as we speak out for the needs of others and hold our leaders accountable. Maybe we ought to practice our own willingness to be held accountable to the standards of love. Maybe new growth might spring forth.

I don't blame the elders of Israel for wanting a king. It's understandable. But what they had already been given was really so much better. They had been given liberation. They had been given an invitation into a different way of being and into a dynamic and loving relationship with God and one another.

Perhaps, rather than a king, what they really needed was a little encouragement to look around and see that many of the ingredients for their collective thriving were already present within their community – that they had the creativity and intelligence to problem solve and collaborate; that they had the collective courage, strength, grit, and faith to face seasons of uncertainty; that the leadership that would serve them best was their shared leadership and collective power; and that God's love would continue to guide, sustain, empower, and inspire them as they stepped into the next phase of their journey together.

Then again, perhaps sometimes it just takes time and the wisdom gained through lived experience to find our way.

Either way, God's faithful invitation into covenantal relationship would endure and still endures.

How will we respond?

Amen.