

“Hope for a House Divided”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

1 Samuel 8:4-20

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Did you see the cover of *Time Magazine* this week? The picture is of the current U.S. president, dressed in a business suit, looking into a mirror. The image looking back at him is of himself, but instead of a business suit, he is wearing a crown and ceremonial robes of a king. The headline says, “King Me. Visions of Absolute Power.”¹ The image couldn’t be more perfect for the lectionary text from the First Testament to foreshadow the kind of ruler Saul, the first King over Israel, would be: a ruler who would stir up divisions in the kingdom, a ruler who would start to pave the way to the people Israel’s demise.

It is not that the prophet Samuel did not warn the people. When all the elders of Israel had come to Samuel to ask that he give them a king to rule them, “like the other nations,” Samuel gives them a dire warning:

- the king will take your sons to fight his wars and put them at the front of his battle lines.
- the king will use your daughters for his sensual delights.
- the king will take the fruits of your labors to pay off those who are loyal to him and support his power.
- he will take the people and animals who do the work to produce from your fields to produce for him instead.
- You will then cry out to the Lord, but the Lord will say, “you have chosen your king.”

And then the people, who were very stubborn, said, “No! Give us our king!”

¹ Time Magazine, June 7, 2018

Samuel the prophet does not want Israel to invest their allegiance to an earthly leader; doing so would lessen their reliance on and faithfulness to God. But wait, there is more! My friend Robert Williamson, who is an Old Testament scholar, notes that in Deuteronomy, which as part of the Torah is an earlier book than 1 and 2 Samuel and also lays down the laws for how people will follow in faithfulness to God, actually *allows* for the coronation of a king to lead God's people. Deuteronomy 17:14-15b, Moses instructs the people, "When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me... you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose.'"

However, the Deuteronomy passage goes on to describe the king as someone who would rule with equity and with an organization of leadership not with a monopolizing of power. "He must *not* acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses... And he must *not* acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must *not* acquire in great quantity for himself.¹⁸ When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law *written for him* in the presence of the levitical priests.¹⁹ It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes,²⁰ *neither exalting himself above other members of the community* nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel."

Contrast the Deuteronomical vision of kingship, where the ruler is seen as on the *same* level as the members of the community, subject to the *same* laws, and humble in possessions, with the kind of king Samuel warns the Israelites about, one that makes them pawns in his acceleration of power "so they can be like the other nations".

You may think to yourselves, “we live in a democracy. Kingship just isn’t the kind of rulership we have to live under.” You are partially right. But even in this democracy, we find ourselves living under someone who does not let himself be subject to the laws of the land like the rest of us are. We are guided by someone who uses women for his sensual pleasures without respect for their bodies or their voices. And then, there are also the kings that have no faces. We bow to the king of violence when we leave our gun laws unchecked, putting guns in the hands of despairing people who might take their own lives or the lives of others. We bow to the king of greed when we insist that our country always have the surplus in trade, requiring that our partners hold the deficit. We bow to the king of greed even though research has shown that our wealth does not make us happy. We have seen those who lived seemingly charmed lives lose their lives to the pits of despair. We bow to the king of immediacy-- I must have it *now* or it is not worth having-- rather than placing our hopes in what God can do through us in the long run.

Instead of choosing like Israel and having a kingdom as our goal, let me instead suggest that we as Christians look for a different kind of community. Did anyone catch what the winning word for the 2018 National Spelling Bee? The winner was a Texan teenager, a 14 year old named Karthik Nemmani. He correctly spelled the word “*koinonia*.” Koinonia comes from the Greek word, and it means a spiritual communion, or a joint fellowship in which all people are valued and participate. As Christians, we should be looking for *koinonia*, rather than any kind of kingdom, as our goal in communal living.

The Apostle Paul told the church in Corinth, “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at

what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

When we bow to what kingship offers, or what it says it offers, we bow to something that is temporary. But what God can offer us through the experience of *koinonia* is eternal. This is something I hope Ollie and Gavin come to know. The water that marked them today in the sacrament of baptism is not just a one time, fleeting moment. It is something that will follow them their whole lives, reminding them of their value in God’s eyes, washing over them to help them start anew in their moments of failure, and holding them afloat when the burdens of life try to pull them down. And we the church will help remind them of these things, help them look for the ways the baptismal waters are active in their lives. That is what *koinonia* does. *Koinonia* is not something that you can find or achieve on your own. It is not an experience you get by elbowing your way to the front of the pack. *Koinonia* draws us together in ways that makes the holy present. That is hopeful news for Ollie and for Gavin. It is hopeful news for you and for me. Amen.