



To Be Like Other Nations

TEXT
1 Samuel 8:4–11,
16–22

June 10, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

There are moments in our lives, minutes of our histories, that are bigger than others.

Some weeks we get to Sunday and can't recount what we've done that week — the days have just gone by. And then there are minutes, seconds that happened many years ago, that we can remember every heartbeat of.

Technically, every day is about the same length, but no day is the same length. We know this. I've just had some of these bigger moments.

I've spent the last three days in Indianapolis, with my little sister, Hannah, as she had her first baby. She wasn't supposed to have her baby this week. I actually planned to preach today, in order to keep the next several Sundays free to be with her if necessary, as she was due some weeks from now. But babies are about as predictable as Kansas weather, and modern medicine is filled with miracles, so when her blood pressure went up this past week, her doctor said it was time.

If you've ever had the experience of counting the seconds of your screaming sister's contractions, you know how long a second can be.

My dad and I sat in the waiting room for days, to hear that all was well with mom and baby. Those days were actually only about 20 minutes. And now she, and her husband, and all of us who already love little Jacob Oryn Cave, will forever be different, changed by a moment.

Sometimes we're aware of the moments as they're happening. You can feel time and the holy washing back and forth over you, telling you to pay attention. And sometimes you don't know. Sometimes it's not until later, as you look back, that you realize the spot, the thing and instant it all changed. Sometimes it's a choice. Sometimes it's something you have no choice in. Always, these moments leave you different than they found you.

The books of Samuel are like this for our faith story. Israel is one thing before Samuel, and something different after. Our story changes here. The identity of our faith ancestors shifts, and they were never the same.

This book begins sounding much like our story that has preceded it. There is creation, goodness and rules to keep it good. There is humanity — made by breath of God and dirt of the earth. There is a tree and fruit, and our desire to reach for the

things we shouldn't have. So there are family feuds, fathers' favoritism and a coat of many colors. Our story is tribal and family-centric, as the relationship between God and humanity takes shape.

So this story too begins with similar images. With a prayerful woman, Hannah, and the baby she has longed and prayed for, Samuel. She dedicates him to the temple with a song of praise, to serve the Lord all his days. He's raised by the old priest, Eli, and is called to be the priest and judge of Israel by God and the people.

It begins with a woman and a song. But that's not how it ends. By the end of Samuel, there is a king, a war, 800 thousand soldiers and a curse upon the land of Israel. Our story changes here. And the point at which it all changes is our text for today.

The elders come to Samuel, their trusted priest and prophet and judge, with a request. They ask Samuel to appoint for them a king.

It's not the first time our Israelite ancestors have ventured this way. Way back in the wilderness, they built themselves a golden cow. Not that long ago, in Judges, Abimelech attempts to make himself a king. These ancestors of ours were familiar

with the desire to seek power in the wrong things — a desire, woven into us since those first days of tempting fruit.

But there's something different about this particular time. It's here that God concedes to their request. Samuel warns them. He warns them with the words of God: *Everything will change if you do this.*

A king? A king will reign over you, will take your sons and make them soldiers, will make them sow his fields, create his weapons. He will take away your daughters to cook for him, your vineyards to grow his food. Elders, if you do this, you will lose your identity. You will cry out because of your king, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

If you make this choice, if you do this thing, everything will be different. Not just how you live, but who you are. You have been the ones who have cried out and have been heard, from the day of Abel's blood on the ground to the days of your bondage in Egypt to today. But that relationship will be forever changed. Now you will cry out, and God will not answer you.

We are determined, they said. We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may be like other nations ... so he can go out before us and fight our battles.

Where there were family stories, there would now be nations to war and kings to serve. Where there were tribal notions of tower-builders and descendent lists, there would now be national allegiances. Where blood and bondage cried out to turn the

ear of God, now God would be silent.

This isn't just a decision about how they would be governed. It's a choice about who they will be in this world. They will be forever changed because of what has happened here.

I have become aware of these bigger-than-usual moments, with this call you have all given me, to work with our young adults.

A lot of things are said about our young adults. Some of them are true. We know that our millennials haven't conformed to the patterns of generations before them. This has led to articles and research and references about millennials that make us seem like some kind of foreign creatures we must learn about in order to live with (a notion I don't entirely disagree with).

One of the more surprising parts of this call has been the curiosity and questions from others — from our not-quite-as-young adults who want to know what to do with these strange creatures.

You have asked for my advice on what to do with millennial children or grandchildren, most typically because they can't seem to plan in advance. You've lamented that you want them to come over for dinner, but they can't seem to commit to a time and place until the last minute. It's as if, you've said, they're waiting to see if a better option comes around. You've heard of this term — FOMO (the Fear Of Missing Out) — and have wanted to know if that's real.

So — disclaimer — I don't condone this. Young adults, go

have dinner with your grandparents when invited!

But some of this FOMO is a real thing, and I contend, it's not just a silly thing, because we understand that the choices we make in this season of life are big ones. Maybe dinner doesn't feel like a big thing. But what if we miss a dinner date with the person we've been messaging with online who might actually be the one? What if we miss an opportunity with a friend, only to realize that friend is moving away next week for work because that literally happens all the time? It's harder to know how to move, and live, and be, in a season where identity is very really taking shape.

Careers are discerned here. Partners are found here. Homes are created here. Babies are made here. Parents become cared for here. All these things are done in different ways, with different options, at different times in this particular generation. But it has always been true that the years of young adulthood are bigger than others. And these are not just logistical things. These are the identity pieces on which futures rest.

These bigger-than-usual moments are not confined to the Old Testament, or hospital waiting rooms, or strictly our young adult years. And maybe it's just because I'm a millennial myself, but at this point in time, I am convinced we're living in one of these moments. We are living in this moment when chaos is abundant and there are all kinds of decisions being made. And I think it's true that decisions

made in these bigger-than-usual moments are rarely just about the “what” and the “how.” They always have something to do with who we are.

Samuel reminds us that God didn’t want them to have a king. It’s easy to read as a critique of monarchy, and it is. But it’s the elders who bring the request to Samuel their judge. It’s their system of distributed representation that calls for the thing they’re not meant to have. No system is exempt from our fruit-grabbing inclinations — the same ones that have kept us reaching for power since our earliest stories.

Samuel reminds us that the elders make this decision out of fear of their neighbors. And it would be easy to point to that; to say their poor choice was made because they were afraid; that we should resist fear at all costs. And perhaps it’s my own tendency to experience FOMO that leads me to believe that fear in and of itself is not the problem. What we fear, can be.

There was a moment in this weekend when we realized that the music and snacks and things we had planned in hopes of easing my sister’s labor weren’t going to do it. There was a moment filled with a medical team and lots of quick and very specific talk where labor pain was quickly reduced in the priority of concerns, and health of baby and mom were paramount. In that moment, my sister and her husband and their doctor made a fast, scary choice — and both baby and mom were saved because of it.

If anyone had popped up in that moment to say, “Hey look, these things work themselves out. I think it’s all going to be fine. Let’s not be afraid,” then this weekend would have been much different.

There are things to fear. But we have to be afraid of the right things.

The elders were afraid of their neighbors, when they should have been afraid of power being in the hands of the few. They’re afraid of the Philistines, when it’s Saul’s decisions and David’s lust and Solomon’s folly and future generations of unanswered exile they should have feared.

And because they reached for power where it shouldn’t have been, and because they feared the wrong things, their identity changes. Our story changes. The story that follows Samuel is one of war, and exile, and generation after generation that cries out. And God answers through prophet’s warning and call for justice. But God is not with them anymore, because of what they did in this one big moment.

So eventually, so many generations later, there is another woman. This one’s name is Mary. And she too has a son, and sings a song of praise. And her son is the answer to the thing that happens back here in Samuel. It’s the eventual answer to generations who groaned under the weight of oppressive rule — rule they once had asked for.

No longer would God rain plague down upon their enemies, work in fire and smoke in show of power. But neither did God leave them. God never does.

So God came as a baby that would become a king. His way was not of battle-winning, but of least-being-first, of feeding the hungry and loving the stranger and freeing the prisoner. God had tried to teach us, now God would show us.

God modeled the kind of power we were meant to seek, dying on the cross. Then mocking the kings of our making, who believed they wield any power over life and death, God was alive again.

And so, the story changed all over again. Now, the relationship between God and the people would be forever different. Now, people wouldn’t need to cry out to God, who had existed in boxes and temples and far, far away. Now God was with them, in them. God would be everywhere.

So, these are big days we are living in. And as is always the case in big days, what we do here is less about how we will be and more about who we will be. And those are harder things.

And I want to believe all will be well because all has been well. I want to resist fear in any form, that remind us we have navigated big days before, that implore us to trust that the arc of history bends towards justice.

And I want to believe that is all true. I will continue to hope and work that it will be. But it wasn’t for Samuel’s people. We are the same amount breath of God and dirt of creation as we were then. We have the capacity to do extraordinary things; we have before. And we have the ability to break it all; we have before.

Samuel reminds us, the forces shouting for a king are as dangerous now as they were thousands of years ago. But I think we're also called to notice, with the witness of our ancient ancestors, that the inclination to assume all will be well is just as dangerous. For God is with us now. We can't put God in a box over here, to tend to our other identities over here. Now, all the world is a dwelling place of the Holy. Now, all are called to see all our choices as the Spiritual kind, because nothing exists outside of God's reign.

So friends, pay attention to the big moments. Pay attention to what changes you, what changes us, and how. I pray we might re-read our oldest stories, heed our ancient warnings, have more dinners with grandparents and millennials, and know the things we do here, in these big moments, matter. Our identity is first to the One who leads to the cross, never the throne. So I pray we choose it, again and again.

May it be so.

Let us pray: Ever-calling God, speak to us, for your servants are trying to hear. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.