

*When God Is Enough* – 1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15

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Last week, we read the story of Eli, the high priest, and his interaction with the boy Samuel. Eli was faltering in his old age, and his sons were no better—corrupt even. And so God was moving on to calling a new spiritual leader for Israel, Samuel. And Eli, despite his faults, was the one to help him interpret God’s call upon his life.

Well, history repeats itself in this story today. Samuel ended up being a good leader. Until he wasn’t. Like Eli, when Samuel had grown old, he appointed his sons to be his successors. And his sons turned out to be just like Eli’s sons. They pursued their own gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.

Samuel’s decision to appoint his own sons as leaders and judges reflected his human fallibility. The people saw it, and they wanted out of this system of leadership based on judges who appointed their own greedy children to take over.

Their proposed solution to the problem, however, only created new problems. The people of Israel wanted a king. Like all these other communities. They wanted a leader who would take charge and provide the military might and protection that they saw was so prevalent in all these other nations. A king would provide the stability they sought for themselves, or so they thought.

In reality, a king would be liable to the same failures and worse. A change of leadership would not ensure justice.

“The people then—like us now—are faced with moral dilemmas and fears for their own survival. We have desires for our own flourishing, yet we are faced with the ethical challenges of human tendencies. Samuel succumbs to the desire to lift up his own sons rather than care for the well-being of all the people. In a way, the people’s response, in calling for a king, has a similar tenor. They want a king so that they can succeed in battle against other peoples. For their own sense of security, they are willing to be slaves to a king. It recalls the people’s response to God when

they are hungry and in danger in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt. It would be better to be slaves in Egypt than to die in the wilderness, they say (Exod. 14:12, 16:3).

“The fantasy of having a strong king includes the mistaken idea that a strong king will care about me and us. A strong king will unite us and conquer our enemies, the story goes; a strong king will make us strong. But Samuel tells a different story: that a strong king will make himself strong and take from us all that we value, including our freedom, our wealth, our property, and even our loved ones. We, the people, will not flourish under a king. Only the king and the king’s loyalists will flourish, and then only as long as they also benefit the king and the king’s power.” (Nannette Sawyer, *Christian Century*, June 2024)

We want from a king what a king cannot give us. And many times, what we get from an earthly king brings the opposite of the care and prosperity we desire.

Upon the people of Israel’s demand for a king, God said in response, through Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”

We put our trust in earthly rulers—to protect us and prosper us. And that’s many times at the expense of the trust we put in God. And while governments should play a part in ensuring the collective good, we continually overestimate their potential for guaranteeing the best outcomes for all.

That’s because governments are made up of fallible leaders who, like the sons of Eli and Samuel, are prisoners of their own sinfulness. They bow to corruption and greed as much as any of us. And as a result, we’re often left disappointed in government’s outcomes.

The earthly kings of our lives are not just human rulers, however. They are the things of the world that we reject God for.

I overheard a conversation this past week when I was out and about. It was an older gentleman bragging on the success of his kids. And like we always do, he got out his cell phone to brag by showing pictures. The first picture he showed, though, was of his son’s palatial mansion on the coast down in South Carolina—the house, the boat dock... There’s nothing

wrong with that kind of achievement and the material success that comes with it. But this proud dad's first inclination to show off his son's wealth made me hope he or his son didn't worship this particular king.

We're all inclined from time to time to worship and follow the king of materialism.

There are so many virtues that we can put to use for ourselves. The writer David Brooks makes the distinction between what he calls resume' virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume' virtues are necessary to highlight the skills we bring to the marketplace—a marketplace that will help insure our financial prosperity. Eulogy virtues, on the other hand, are those virtues that are talked about at our funerals: whether we were kind, brave, honest, faithful, and loving. Those might help us in the marketplace, too, but they also help us steer clear of the materialism that veers us toward the wrong king.

As opposed to human kings that will sometimes lead us off course, the divine King is sufficient. God is enough.

As Christians, we may view God as our ultimate leader and try to apply our faith in him across the board of our lives. But we may also find times when it seems that God is not enough for the pain, loss or grief life brings to us. God is not a good enough or faithful enough king.

How do we discover that the divine king is enough even through these times?

Several years ago, in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy in Sutherland Springs, Texas, where a gunman opened fire on a worshiping congregation in a small Baptist church, killing 26 and wounding 20, *Christianity Today* published an article about research that shows that "people of faith, *particularly those who receive support from their churches and religious communities*, fare better in their recovery" (emphasis added). The article continues: "After a mass shooting, people who felt supported by their religious communities ultimately experienced fewer symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and their faith didn't suffer as much. ... researchers found that after a mass shooting, similar to what studies show in the wake of natural disasters, 'religious support buffers the deleterious relationship between resource loss and negative

outcomes.' That means, even when the suffering is greater, survivors with high levels of support from their faith communities don't show the level of worsening symptoms experienced by people without such community."

This is a way of saying God's people are the ones who reassure us that God is sufficient, so when we are in pain, letting the Christian community minister to us is where we learn from experience that God is enough.

Also when we're questioning whether God is enough, it may be because we're thinking of this enough-ness as total solutions to our problems. But consider this: Author Anne Lamott was a single mother who found her way to the Lord after several years of drug and alcohol abuse. A great part of what enabled her to embrace the Christian way and continue to live it was the support and love she found from members of a small church she started attending -- people who put the skin on God's sufficiency. Even after coming to Christ, Lamott's life was not easy, but she experienced the help of the Lord through the friendships and prayers of those faithful people.

Here's something she wrote about that: "It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools -- friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty -- and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they're enough."

Through God, they are enough. God is the king who is enough.

I like what the Rev. Nanette Sawyer wrote about this whole concept of God being enough, and that we find that enough-ness through the virtues of one another. She said, "When the people of Israel find a new vision and use their power collectively, perhaps a king is not necessary for survival. Maybe starvation in the desert and slavery in Egypt are not the only two options. God's story, our story, is a long one, and we are only in the middle of it. Now is a time to heed Samuel's warnings. Now is a time to utilize all of our resources—our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love—to work toward God's dreams for our world."

This divine king is one who doesn't give in to temptation. Christ the king is not one who lets his ambitions be used for selfish gain. Christ the king loves all his servants and dares to call us all friends. Christ the king is a king who will never forsake us when the going gets tough. Christ the king is always working for justice and peace, for the well-being of all.

Christ the king doesn't prevent us from experiencing pain and loss. Instead, Christ travels with us through our loss and offers us a hope and lasting prosperity.

All this is far more than any other king—human or material—can promise. This king is more than enough.