

## **One True King**

**11-5-23**

(Samuel 8:1-22; Matthew 23:1-12) Rev. James Koyama

### **A Minister's Role**

I'd like to introduce this morning's reflection by sharing some thoughts about my own understanding of what is required of me from the pulpit. I think it will help us think about the people to whom we allow positions of authority in our lives.

It won't surprise you to know that, as your Minister, I have very little authority, other than the power of persuasion. It is not my right to speak to you from the pulpit. It is a privilege that you have granted to me and that you can take away, if you decide that I am not talking about the things I was put here to talk about.

You did not put me here to say whatever I think is most pleasing to the ear or to promote my own views. You put me here in part, because I have been seminary trained and certified as someone who can help us think about what God may be saying to us through scripture, so that you can apply what you hear to your lives.

My role is conditional, as it should be, because being in the pulpit doesn't change the fact that I am a limited human being and a sinner, as we all are. And the possibility always exists that I, like anyone, could

become completely out of touch or become a tyrant who is no longer suited to fill my position.

The reality is that, whether I think so or not, I don't always understand what God really wants us to hear through scripture. And this is because I can't help but filter what God is saying through my own personal experiences and needs.

And so it is important for me and for you to be aware that what I say from the pulpit is to be said with humility, and that it should be taken not as God's truth, but as my best effort to serve that truth. And it seems to me that, very often God does use the best efforts of a preacher to tell you what you really need to hear, in spite of the preacher's failings.

Of course, if a person is going to say anything at all, the only way to do it is by calling on personal experience, and so I have to try to call on my experiences in a way that serves the Gospel and honors your ability to think for yourselves; because, in fact, respecting your freedom to think and choose for yourself is key to the spirit of the Gospels.

And because we all understand that I am not a perfect mouthpiece, you have a responsibility as followers of Jesus to filter what you hear from

this pulpit, the way you filter what you hear anywhere else. You can look up the page numbers of the scripture I am referring to and see for yourself whether you think that what I am saying really is justified by the words you see on the page.

I'd like to throw in a little qualifier here that has never in the entire history of the world, been spoken from the pulpit until maybe the last year or two. I have never and will never use Artificial Intelligence or Chat GPT to make my sermons for me. Nothing I say to you from this pulpit is machine generated, and everything I say comes from my own personal struggle to understand the message of the Bible for our lives. And if there are any other sources that you need to know about, I will mention them. That's a promise.

I think that this is the way God intends it to be. God does not want people who pretend to be higher beings, standing between God's own self and others as the final decider of what is true and worthy of attention. It doesn't matter who the speaker is, whether it is a country pastor, a movie star or the President of the United States, no-one is obligated to accept what that person says as the unquestionable truth.

And furthermore, enshrined in our religious and our civic tradition, is the understanding that people who are put in positions of authority,

serve at the pleasure of the whole and are subject to removal if they are not doing what they have been authorized to do by the people.

Which brings us to our Old Testament reading from Samuel. Let me put in a nutshell what I think God is saying to us here. I think God is saying that Godself is the best leader we can have. And certainly, if we were all willing to live fully in response to the Holy Spirit of God's love, we would not need other human beings to order our lives for us.

Unfortunately, we are not good at listening to God, and so with great reluctance God consents to the people's desire for a king. It seems that God recognizes that, in a world of competing nations, we need to give individuals special power to organize for our prosperity and for our defense. And so, God consents to the demands of the people for a king.

But, God is also quick to warn that there will be negative consequences and that the people will suffer for their choice.

Although written 2500 years ago, the passage from Samuel does a good job of describing the anxiety many of us today feel about what is happening right now with our nation's leadership. Just as the sons of the Prophet Samuel became corrupt and no longer lived with integrity, the sons of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln today have done likewise.

And our response to our own anxiety is eerily similar to the response of the people of ancient Israel. "Give us a king," they said. "Give us someone whose power is unchecked and not accountable to voters, who will stop the squabbling and restore order. Give us a king."

And the way God responds to their demand is important. So I am going to read it again. God says to Samuel,

“You shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

And what follows is a long paragraph that lays bare the truth about what will happen if they (or potentially we) get what we are asking for. I urge us all as Americans to heed these words spoken by Samuel at the direction of God:

He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and **you shall be his slaves. And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you on that day.**”

Having heard these words, the people refuse to listen and continue to demand a king, at which point God concedes. I think that this is kind of like God saying, “Ok. Let them learn the hard way.” In other words, our God who gives us freedom to choose, lets the people exercise their free

will, giving them the freedom to even choose enslavement over freedom with responsibility.

### **The Gospel Reading**

And when we fast forward to this morning's Gospel, Jesus's words echo this same warning. He says:

Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

These are powerful warnings. Perhaps doubly powerful for me, because they speak to my own experience, as the son of a man who's entire neighborhood was flattened by bombs as a consequence of being ruled over by a King, in this case the Emperor of Japan.

But it is not just my experience, it is the experience of millions of immigrants who have fled to this country across the generations. They came in part because they knew the harsh reality of what it means to be ruled by kings. And they came because America held out to them the promise of freedom to determine the course of their own lives.

They wanted a freedom, like the freedom God gives his children to decide the course of their own lives and the freedom to choose leaders

who would be accountable to the people and whose power could be held in check and who could also be dismissed.

All of this is consistent with the spirit of Congregationalism which, for better and worse, seeks to be as non-heirarchical as possible, while at the same time accepting that order has to be maintained by giving people temporary authority.

Protestantism Christianity rejects the idea that anyone has an absolute right to stand between any other person and God and demand that the other person's understanding must be identical with their own as though this were the will of God.

Our understanding is that God can and does speak to each individual uniquely, that each voice is to be considered and respected and that we can thrive in the diversity of understandings that result when we listen to each other's voices. At the same time, we are self-professed Christians, who have freely chosen to be united in looking to Jesus Christ as the ultimate guide for our community.

We are in a difficult and unstable time in our history, a time in which our democracy is in dire need of an overhaul. It is a time in which many will be calling for a king who is not accountable to those checks and balances, and who will be authorized to establish his will by force. And

there will come a time when each of us will pull the lever and vote on what kind of people we want to put in charge. Foremost in my mind will be voting into place people who understand the relationship between being given the authority necessary to regulate and order the nation, and the freedom of the people who's will they serve. It is not an authority impose their will, but to participate in a compromise. When that time comes, I hope that these passages will help you to make the choice our nation has always made in the past; the choice to reject Kingship.