

## THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

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1 Samuel 8:4-10

In 1936, the reigning monarchs of the British throne were King George V and Queen Mary. On January 20 of that year, 1936, at age 70, after reigning as king for 26 years, King George died. The crown passed immediately to his eldest son Edward. Edward was 42-years-old.

When Edward became King Edward VIII, he was unwed. He was, however, seeing a woman named Wallis Simpson. Mrs. Simpson was an American from Pennsylvania and she had been married and divorced twice. As king, if Edward chose to marry Wallis Simpson, it would create a constitutional crisis. It was commonly accepted that this woman was not suitable to be queen. If the marriage went through, the Parliament was sure to resign. Furthermore, as king, Edward was head of the church and the church did not recognize divorce. There was much at stake here.

Subsequently, on December 11—just 326 days after becoming king, and even before his coronation—Edward took to BBC Radio to address the British people and announce his abdication from the throne—an announcement that shocked the Empire. It was not possible, the king said, to discharge his duty without the help and support of the woman he loved. He handed the crown to his brother Albert who became King George VI. Edward married Simpson and they lived most of their lives in France. Edward died in 1972. Simpson died in 1986. They are both buried in the Royal Burial Ground at Windsor.

Our reading today from 1 Samuel is also about an abdication—about a king stepping down to make way for another king. But this isn't about a human king. Instead, it is God who relinquishes the throne.

In the early days of the Jewish people, when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the people had no king but God. In time, the demands of the people became too great for Moses to handle alone, so he appointed a system of judges to attend to the people's needs. These judges served as regional administrators. This system of judges worked for about two centuries. The judges oversaw the day-to-day life of the people and in times of crisis God would lift up specific individuals to carry out God's will. Usually, these people were known as prophets. These prophets included Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and so on, until we get to Samuel around 1000 BC.

A political scientist would categorize Israel's system of government as a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. When necessary, they could muster a common militia for their defense.

However, in time, a certain demand arose from the people. They demanded a king. This demand was precipitated by the fact that the prophet Samuel was advancing in age and his sons did not appear to be leadership material. As we find in our reading, the people confront Samuel saying, *You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways*. Apparently, the boys didn't have what it took to continue the family business.

The people demanded that Samuel appoint for them a king, a king who would rule them *like other nations*. Possibly the Israelites were feeling a bit out-of-fashion. The nations around them had kings. Why didn't they? Who were they without a king? Could they be taken seriously on the world stage? They needed a king. A king would bring continuity. The people wouldn't have to wonder who God would raise up next to be their leader. Of course, the failure of hereditary succession was at the root of their concerns. It was the sons of Samuel, after all, that weren't king material.

A king would centralize the government. They would be one nation instead of twelve tribes. They would appear more powerful. A king would bring a clear chain of command. People would know who was in charge. And furthermore, who doesn't like a little royal pomp and circumstance. How many of you woke up early a couple of Saturdays back to watch the royal wedding? (which, ironically, was between a prince and a divorced American.)

Hearing this call of the people, Samuel prayed to God saying, *Give us a king*. God responded telling Samuel not to take the peoples' request personally. It was not Samuel or his sons that were being rejected, it was God. God is king, yet the people clamored for another king. God said to Samuel, *Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you*.

A human king, however, comes with a price, and God outlines the demands a human king would make on the people. A king, God said, will:

- Take your sons to make an army
- Take your people to farm his land and manufacture weapons
- Take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers
- Take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers
- Take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give to his courtiers
- Take your male and female slaves
- Take the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to work
- Take one-tenth of your flocks
- You shall be his slaves.

And then, when the people cry out in anguish because of the suffering they feel under their own king, God promises not to run to the rescue. As our reading puts it, *The Lord will not answer you in that day.*

Despite these warnings, the people repeat their demand saying, *We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.* So, Samuel did as they asked and anointed Saul as the first king. As you will recall, that did not turn out so well. Apparently, Saul was chosen for two reasons: he was tall and he was handsome. That was about it. His reign was brief and violent. He did not abdicate his throne. Instead, he died in battle against the Philistines. David was named his successor.

I feel that on the day that the people demanded a king, something remarkable was lost. The Israelites should not have felt inferior to the other nations. With a human king, they were just like everyone else. With God as their king, they could rightly claim to be part of God's kingdom on earth.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote these words: You see things; and you say "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say "Why not?" In the spirit of those words I want to invite you to take a moment and engage your theological imaginations. I want you to ponder, 'what if.' What if we lived in a land where God was recognized as the king. What would that be like?

The word that describes this system is theocracy. Unfortunately, that term has become distasteful to us because of the many times people have falsely used God's name as a weapon to subjugate others. But put those images aside and ponder 'what if.'

To live with God as king, the first thing is that people must do is relinquish the quest for the accumulation of personal power, the kind of power that people use to place themselves above others, the kind of power gained through wealth and strength. In the gospels, we read of Jesus' deeds of power, but those were always acts of compassion and care—healing the injured, feeding the hungry, caring for the broken. Jesus never used power to subjugate, threaten, or intimidate. His was a power of love. Jesus was seeking to bring the kingdom of God into this world. What if the only power we sought was the power of love? What if the laws we followed were laws of compassion? What if love of neighbor was the highest civic virtue?

Imagine what it would be like to live where God was king. Honestly, people have been imagining this forever. We think of it as a utopia, a perfect place. Through the generations many communities have been formed seeking a perfect society. For various reasons, each has failed leading us to believe that a perfect society is unobtainable.

But let me suggest this. Instead of trying to get a group together to commit to living in community, how about this, you just live your life as if God is king. Go through your day as if God is your king. You can still acknowledge the worldly powers of presidents and kings, congressmen, mayors, and legislators, but in all your thoughts and actions, place God at the top. You don't need to build a separate town, you only need build a place in your heart. Dream the things that never were and say 'why not.' Let the kingdom begin there.