

## KING OF HEARTS

SHERARD EDINGTON

1 Samuel 8:1-9

Who is the best U.S. president? Which one is the worst? Historians love to engage in the subjective game of ranking the U.S. presidents from best to worst. At the top of this list you will always find Abraham Lincoln and George Washington and usually the Roosevelts—both of them—Franklin and Teddy. The bottom of the list gets a little messier. Hovering near the bottom, you will usually find William Henry Harrison. We really don't know if Harrison was an especially bad president or even a good one. He only lasted 31 days in office. The day of his inauguration was exceptionally cold and wet, and the president declined to dress appropriately. He died of pneumonia. It probably didn't help that he also delivered the longest inauguration speech on record at over two hours.

But the president frequently found at the bottom of the list is ... well, let me tell you about him.

This president is known for having a White House consumed with drama and corruption. This president entered office on a decidedly pro-business platform and quickly slashed taxes on corporations and the wealthy. People associate this president with being pro-tariff and anti-immigration. There was also an extramarital affair for which hush money was paid out unsuccessfully. This president's Secretary of the Interior was caught up in a scandal when he rented out public lands in exchange for gifts and personal loans.

By now, of course, you realize that I am talking about the 29th president of the United States—Warren G Harding. It was his administration that gave us the Teapot Dome scandal.

The framers of the U.S. constitution were brilliant in that they recognized that in forming "a more perfect union," they were working with a clean slate, a fresh canvas—the opportunity to create an entirely new form of government. These men were students of history and philosophy and they scoured the past searching for ideas that worked—as well as those that didn't. They rejected the idea of a monarchy in favor of leadership chosen by the people. No matter how beneficent a monarch might be, there is always the possibility that a monarch might govern with a heavy hand. The framers envisioned a system where all people are equal. The framers recognized that even elected leaders can become corrupt. So, they designed a system of checks and balances across the government. The framers attempted to anticipate any troubles that might arise with this government and they designed remedies to counteract these misdeeds.

For example, there is the arcane notion of emoluments. Until recently, I was not familiar with this word. The framers forbid any American officeholder from accepting any gifts, emoluments, titles, or office from any foreign state. The basis of this emoluments clause was the Treaty of Dover of 1670 between England and France. After the treaty had been put into effect, some years later it was revealed that in exchange for money and other gifts, the king of England, Charles II, basically, in that treaty, sold out to King Louis XIV of France. The framers, a century later, recognized the influence a foreign government could exert over the new republic. The framers understood that even the best leaders could place their own self-interest over the best interest of the people they lead and serve.

The ongoing experiment of American government pushes us to ponder the question of whether or not there is a better form of government than the one we have? One that is not subject to corruption and self-dealing? One in which leaders always serve the best interests of the people over their own best interests. Our reading today from 1 Samuel tells us that yes, there is a better form of government.

When Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the people had no leader other than Moses. Moses had been appointed by 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 lasted 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 regarded as prophets. These prophets included Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and so on, until we get to Samuel around 1000 BC.

A modern political scientist would categorize Israel's system of government as a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. When necessary, the tribes 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 two 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.*

The people, therefore, 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? 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. A king would centralize the government and bring

security. The people would become one nation instead of twelve tribes. They would appear to the world to be more powerful. A king would bring a clear chain of command. People would know who was in charge.

Hearing this call of the people, Samuel turns to God and prays saying, *Give us a king*. God respond telling Samuel not to take the peoples' request personally. It was not Samuel or his sons that were being rejected; it was God who was being rejected. The people clamored for a human 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 clearly 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 that 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
- In the end, you will become slaves to the king.

When the people were slaves in Egypt, God heard their cries of anguish and came to them. But this time, when they become slaves to a king, God will not to run to their rescue. As our reading puts it, *The Lord will not answer you in that day*. That is the path they are choosing.

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 does as they ask and anoints 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 died in battle against the Philistines. David, the shepherd boy, was named his successor.

On the day that the people demanded a king, I feel that something remarkable was lost. The Israelites should not have felt inferior to the other nations. With a

human king, they become 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 encourage you to take a moment and engage your theological imaginations. I want you to ponder the 'what if.' What if we lived in a land where God is recognized our leader? What would that be like? Would we fight wars? Would we abuse the environment? Would we always act in our own self-interest or would we treat others as we would want then to treat us?

To live with God as king, the first thing is we must do is relinquish our quest for the accumulation of personal power—the kind of power 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, intimidate, or demean. His was a power of love. Jesus' goal was 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 observed were laws of compassion? What if love of neighbor was the highest civic virtue? What if the leader we gladly follow is our God? What if we choose God's kingdom over anything else?

The solution is simple. Live your life as if God is your king. Go through your day as if God is your leader. You can still acknowledge the worldly powers of presidents and kings, congressmen, mayors, and legislators. *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's*. But in all your thoughts and actions, place God at the top. Build a place for God in your heart. Dream the things that never were and say, 'why not.' Let the kingdom begin.