

Thy Kingdom Come
First Presbyterian Church
1 and 2 Samuel (selected verses)
All Saints Sunday

The Reverend Corey Nelson
Lake Forest, Illinois
November 4, 2007

After a forty year journey through the wilderness and a battle to occupy the Promised Land, the Hebrew people have finally *arrived*. And, as it seems to be human nature, both in the days of yore as well as today, when people finally “arrive,” at whatever place or position they had sought to achieve, they quickly set out to make sure they are like everyone else around them. It was fine for the community of people to commit themselves to the leadership of the Lord and to promise themselves that every aspect of life will mirror the will of the Lord, but now as they seek to become “a nation” they can’t help but look at the examples of other nations around them decide it time to “keep up with the Jones’”. The realities and challenges of social and political life led them to conclude that it would be much easier to put a human face on leadership. However, Israel will discover, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “in human leadership sinfulness intrudes, as does ignorance and incompetence, and those who are selected to represent God before the people often do no more than reflect the people’s own corrupted ways. Every experiment in Utopia is bound to fail, and as ancient Israel discovered this harsh reality early on in its life in the land, so have many other human communities since the days of King Saul.”

It is important to remember that this was not the first time people sought a king. In Judges 8, the people call on Gideon to be crowned but he refuses saying, “I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.”

But now Samuel is confronted with the outcry once again from the people demanding a king to rule over them and to fight their battles for them. Samuel, understandably feels rejected, “Has it been for nothing that I have led the nation?” he wonders. Yet, it is not Samuel’s, but Yahweh’s emotions that are highlighted. However, even as God also feels rejected by the people and implores them, through Samuel, to consider all of the reasons they should NOT

choose a king for themselves, God never rejects them, merely points out the consequences of their choices.

As we read through the stories of First and Second Samuel, it may appear that God is of two minds on the subject of Israel's monarchy. These warnings, through Samuel, stand in sharp contrast with praise the establishment of David as King (2 Samuel 7). Yet it is in the very tension we encounter here that we begin to explore the paradox that is implicit in the effort to build the kingdom of God on earth. The people of God, no matter how great their dedication (and that is always questionable), cannot resist the urge to take God's matters into their own hands. Nor should they! Nor should we. For simply to sit back and relax expecting that God will take care of all the hard issues of life is a thinly veiled form of escapism. We shall work at building up the kingdom of God, because we that is the very thing we are called to do. But, even as we do so, we are forced to admit that it is not we, but God, who will eventually bring the kingdom into perfect realization. Our efforts, while useful, are finite and incomplete.

Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador understood this reality when he wrote the following:

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith...

This is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted (*a particularly poignant realization on this All Saint's Sunday as we remember those who have planted seeds before us, seeds that we water, and those who have watered seeds before us that we now harvest.*) Romero continues, We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Yahweh gives in to the demand for a King and Saul is chosen according to the people's criteria. He is literally head and shoulders above the rest. But when Saul's faithfulness and courage fail him and the people of Israel, God makes the next choice for king based upon Divine criteria and, proving his point, he chooses David, the youngest and smallest of Jesse's sons. "Do not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart," God tells Samuel. People of every age and time, including ourselves we must admit, are always tempted to give into the need to judge and prejudge based on outward appearances

On the one hand, we can be left believing that it is our clothing, our style, our automobiles, our houses or anything else we can consume in our materialistic world which will better present an image of ourselves.

On the other hand, taken to its furthest extreme, this inclination to judge on outward appearances can lead to racism, sexism, and classism. And let's be honest, this is true even within the church itself, I confess as I stand before you in this overpriced but unflattering black dress adorned with a beautiful green stole. A stole which ironically is meant to symbolize in part the humility of Christ wrapping a towel around himself to wash the disciples' feet. Oh even in the church itself we are reminded that it is so easy to look on the outward appearance, that we forget that it is God who looks only upon the heart.

And so, looking not on the outward appearance, God chooses David, whose heart is of God, whose trust is deep, whose courage and intellect are offered in service to God for a Divine agenda. For it is upon this heart for God that David trusts when confronted with Goliath and not on the odds against him. It is this courage and intellect upon which David uses to serve God when confronted with the challenge of uniting the Northern and Southern tribes of Israel. Moving the capital to a geographic center of the kingdom which is Jerusalem and bringing in

the Ark of the Covenant, the ultimate symbol of God's presence and covenant, to be right in the center of Jerusalem.

Having brought the Ark to the Jerusalem, David declares that he will build a house for God. But, in a clever wordplay on the "house" as a building and as a dynasty, God tells David not to worry about a building a structure [that task will be taken up by David's son Solomon] Instead, God will make from David's lineage a "house" or "dynasty" that will "shall be made sure before me." And as we trace now the story of God and God's people from here on out, we will increasingly come to realize that this promised "house" or "kingdom" will indeed last forever and spread to the corners of the earth as far as the east is from the west.

This house of God, promised in the covenant to David, will always lie beyond any one church or denomination or even national boundaries. Our guests from Nanjing this morning remind us that we are indeed a part of an international global "house" where the family of God resides.

And yet, Just as the future is looking so bright for David and the Kingdom of God, the sinfulness that Samuel had warned the people about begins to creep in. The stories of David & Bathsheba and the tragic family drama that follows serves as a reminder to the people of Israel and to us today that we humans, no matter how great, are always limited in that very humanity when it comes to building up the Kingdom of God together. Some might find here a reason for cynicism or hopelessness in taking up the call that God has given to us. But I have to say that I find in these stories examples of God's profound grace and love. For as we have traced the biblical narrative from the stories of Adam & Eve through Abraham & Sarah and Moses and now up to Saul and David we are reminded, in even these sacred stories passed down for thousands years, that God calls men and women *in their whole being* to the life of faith. We don't see in these stories a highly edited form of story that only tells great narrative mythologies of these people; that only tells the best of themselves, instead we see the whole person.

So, when we read the stories of David, we come to realize that it is the same fierce courage that confronted and slew Goliath that also dared seduce Bathsheba

It is the same charisma and passion that drove David to dance wildly that also tempted him to enjoy the spoils of war and abuse the perks of leadership

And it was the same tender heart for God that sang songs of praise and thanksgiving for all that God had given and also sang songs of deep lament and shame when he realized his own sin and mortality.

David was asked not to leave those parts of himself behind that were unworthy of the calling. Instead, God invited all of David to be present in his call, in his life of faith.

As we gather around this communion table this morning we are reminded that we too are called to bring our whole selves to the table. If we think that there are parts of ourselves or of our families or our communities that we are meant to leave outside the door, or “check” in the narthex before we walk into this holy place, no. No, instead we are called to bring our whole selves, all of us, to the life of faith.

As we extend the table this day to include not only Saints of every time, remembering particularly those who have died in the past year, but also the Saints of every place, even as we welcome our friends from Nanjing this morning, we can be assured together of the grace and love of God who invites each of us and all of us, our whole selves, to be present at this table. Let our song of response, “Take, O Take Me As I Am”, be our prayer this morning as we lift up our whole selves to God, remembering that we are called to bring every part of ourselves to the life of faith, to the community of faith, to building up the kingdom of God. Amen