

Proper 5b 2021
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
June 6, 2021

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 11:14-15 Psalm 138 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 Mark 3:20-35

We are at an amazing beginning! We have started reading a history of the biblical judge Samuel and kings Saul and David. We will weave our way through this saga in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and into a few chapters in 1 Kings. This history is an imaginative one, woven together from folk stories, oral memories and the scribes themselves. Writer John Holbert describes the story in this way: “it was dreamed by fabulous writers ... who conjured the accounts of the founders of the land of Israel as [complex] and unforgettable human beings, caught in the throws of power and its abuse and at the same time trying to suggest just what Yahweh had to do with it all.” (patheos.com from 6-4-2015) The history of the priestly judge Samuel and the huge figures of Saul and David does not come primarily from archeological digs – although they factor into its historicity – but from minds that show us the character, strengths and failings, of Samuel, Saul, and David.

We have a first glimpse of the story today. God has been choosing judges for the people of Israel since the time of the Exodus; Israel stands out as a unique nation with God as their king. Samuel, raised by the priest Eli, is called by God to be the successor to Eli as the priestly judge for Israel, still with God as their king. Later in Samuel’s life, the people of Israel demand that Israel have a king “like everyone else has.”

The aging judge and prophet Samuel tells Israel the high cost of submitting to a human king: (verses 10-18) list what Israel will lose:

Your sons and daughters;
The best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves;
Your slaves, male and female;
Your animals, flocks, your money in taxes,
and your freedom itself.

You will become slaves as the king carries out his life and builds the military power of a nation – just like the others.

Samuel foretells what will happen, and the people demand a king anyway. “Give us a king like everyone else!” Where is God? I wonder if Yahweh has anything to do with this history and what might it tell us today.

God is fully present in this story; Yahweh has raised up Samuel as a judge who rules over Israel in the way that judges ruled. Judges are priestly rulers; God is their king. Unease sets in when the people fear that God might call one of Samuel’s corrupt sons to be their next judge and ruler. When the people of Israel demand a king, Samuel retreats in prayer. Why, God, are they rejecting me? Through prayer, God speaks to Samuel again. Samuel my son, the people are rejecting you, but in fact, they are rejecting me, God. Israel is rejecting the ways of God in their insistence on a human king. Give them their king, although we know that his rule will bring incalculable losses. And so the history of kings begins ...

Fast forward to approximately 65 AD. By this time, Christ has died and is risen to the Father. The apostles are dying out; Paul, James, and Peter, huge leaders in the early church and in

spreading the gospel, are dead. The church is in danger, under persecution, and Jesus has not returned. There is urgency to capture the gospel – the good news – in writing so that it will not be lost. The generations, the world, needs to know about Jesus the Christ. Mark is a masterful writer. We recall that Mark writes in “sandwiches, Markan sandwiches.” The technical term is intercalation, and today’s gospel is one (complicated) example. Let’s look at the reading again, the one you just heard. Here is the outside story, the “bread.”

Verses 20 and 21 are a piece of one story:

²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

[The story continues (31-34)]

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³And [Jesus] replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” These words of Jesus always hurts my feelings; must we give up our family for Jesus? I’ll get back to that.

Within this complete story is another one:

²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And [Jesus] called [the scribes] to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

²⁷But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. ²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — ³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

The story in the middle of the Markan sandwich could also stand on its own; however, it is dropped into the “outer” story. We move from crowd to family to scribes. We remember that scribes are people of power; here, they see the things that Jesus is doing – healing and forgiving, and dismiss them as demonic, dismissing the power and grace of God.

At the very center of the story, Jesus speaks of the absurdity of the scribes suppositions. Jesus heals people, spreads God’s mercy and grace. The unforgiveable sin that Jesus describes is seeing God’s action, watching people returned to wholeness and to abundant life, and denying that the healing is the action of God. Early in the gospel of Mark, we are shown that the scribes are fearful of who Jesus is, and that Jesus is a threat to the rulers of the day. Their absurd pronouncements cannot thwart Jesus and the works of God.

Crowds, family, scribes, Jesus, with Jesus at the very center. Having dealt with the scribes, Jesus turns to his family. Jesus dismissing his family is to broaden our vision on who and what family is, moving it from biological terms into the family of those who follow Jesus – that’s us! We move from “crowd” to family, and that is who we are today.

God calls to us just as he once called to a young boy named Samuel. Our king is at the center, not just of this Markan sandwich, but of all that our faith family is and does. God is at work healing, mending, making people whole. God kept his covenant with the Israelites, working through the most unlikely of rulers: a young boy named Samuel, and two deeply flawed people raised up to be kings.

The only one who can live up to all the qualities the people sought in a king is Jesus, our Lord and Savior and King. As Jesus will say to Pilate, his kingdom is not of this world. As the Christian church, we are part of that “other world” of Jesus Christ – carrying out the gospel with deeply flawed people – ourselves. We find abundance in difficult times; we seek out Christ in all persons; we love beyond measure, call ourselves family. No one is left out or left behind, because the center of all that we do – is God, in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit.

We are at an amazing beginning! With the psalmist we raise our voices and say:

¹I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

³On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.