

Sermon for Proper 5, June 9, 2024  
St. Luke/San Lucas, Vancouver WA  
1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Creator God,  
May your words be heard in our ears,  
Understood in our minds,  
Felt in our hearts,  
And lived out in our acts.  
Amen.

In our Old Testament reading today, we have the story of the Hebrew people's search for leadership. Following their return from Egypt, they were governed by a series of judges, who used Moses' law as guidelines to settle internal disputes, and by priests and prophets, who delivered God's guidance.

During the time of Samuel, the Hebrew people began asking for a king. Do you remember from the reading why they wanted a king? (Because others had a king. To lead them in battle.)

Because everyone else had a king, an authoritarian ruler, to represent them. The Egyptians had a pharaoh. The Assyrians had a king. The Babylonians had a king. The various smaller tribes and cities surrounding Israel had rulers, kings, to represent them. Their archenemies, the Philistines, had a king. And the Hebrew people wanted one, too.

To lead them in battle. They were facing conflict with the Philistines who wanted their territory and resources. And it was a challenge, one they had a real fear of losing. And, rather than placing their trust in God, they wanted an earthly leader for their army, a king who could fight for their safety and continued survival as a nation.

So, they asked Samuel to give them a king, to anoint a ruler, a leader. Samuel was a bit offended by this request, but he went ahead and spoke with God about it. God told Samuel to do as the people requested, to find them a king.

Why did they choose Saul? What were they looking for in a king? This isn't in today's reading, but some of you may remember it from Sunday school lessons or Bible studies. (A military leader. A tall, handsome ruler.)

They wanted a king to govern them, to head up their armies, to lead them in battle. Saul was chosen for his ability as a military leader, because he was tall and strong. Saul was a gifted general, leading his army against the Philistine invaders and inspiring great loyalty in his army.

However, he was not as gifted in other areas. Although he did begin to tax the people, he did not set up a system of internal governance and he struggled with religious obligations. He suffered from what are thought to be migraines, which greatly impacted his behavior. In the end, Saul's weaknesses led to his defeat. He was replaced, not by his son, Jonathon, but by his son's best friend, Saul's own son-in-law, David.

As we head into our own leadership search, as we look for a new Rector following Father Jesus' well-deserved retirement, what lessons can we glean from today's readings?

First, we need to take a look at ourselves, at our own capacities and needs, and not be distracted by what everyone else, or even just the church next door, is doing. We need to find a person who is right for us.

And part of that comes through self-examination. We have a profile committee that is helping us dig deeply into who we are, who we want to be in the future. But their work will only be successful if we all participate, fully, openly, and honestly, in the process.

Yes, we will be able to recount our history, and list out all our strengths. We will also need to look at those areas where we face challenges, where we are lacking, where we could use some experienced guidance. We need to be able to examine who we are as a community today, and to be able to agree upon and communicate clearly who we want to be in the future.

In discussing our past and looking at our future, we may find that we have differing experiences and perspectives, differing views on what happened and what we are looking for in the future. Feelings may bubble up that are uncomfortable. That is all normal. It means we are doing the hard work of self-examination. Rest assured that the clergy, the vestry, the pastoral care team are here to support us all as we go through this search and, if we are uncomfortable at times, we are probably doing it right.

Next, we need to be careful not to be taken in by appearances. While we don't have anything against tall, strong, handsome individuals, we need to make sure that we are looking more deeply into the person, at the qualities and characteristics we have been instructed to look for in spiritual leaders.

From Timothy, we learn that our leaders should live wisely, exercise self-control, have a good reputation. They must enjoy working with people and not have favorites, to treat individuals with equity. They need to have integrity, to be gentle and humble. They should be good teachers and responsible money managers.

And perhaps most of all, we need to recognize that our leaders will not be perfect. Look at the great leaders of the Bible: Moses, David, Peter. These were flawed individuals who made mistakes, sometimes big ones, but they were people who loved God. Our leaders are imperfect human beings, who are committed to the mysteries of faith, who walk with God and are open to the Spirit's leading.

How do we go about finding this leader? We have processes and procedures, built on experience. We will have committees and questionnaires, focus groups and vestry meetings. But the most important part has nothing to do with all our policies and practices. Rather, it has to do with our own spiritual lives. The most important, critical aspect of the search process is that we open ourselves up and listen, really listen, to God.

In their desire for a king, the Hebrew people were not paying attention to God. As our reading for today outlines, they were not rejecting Samuel, they were rejecting God, forsaking God and serving other gods. Thinking they knew better what they needed. And I can give you a preview of the next few chapters—it did not go well for them.

As we enter our own period of searching, of discernment, we can take lessons from these experiences. We see that we need to be grounded fully in our faith, not distracted by the world around us. We need to spend time in prayer. And we need to open our ears and our hearts before we open our mouths, so that we can listen, truly listen, to each other, to the wisdom brought to us through our Scriptures and, most importantly of all, to the Spirit's voice.

I'd like to close with a prayer found on page 818 in our Prayer Book:

Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.