

June 17, 2018

Father's Day

I Samuel 8: 4-20

Prayer: Dear Lord, We thank you for this glorious season of warmth and rebirth and the beauty of your creation. Go with us as we look at your ancient texts, and show us what you would have us glean. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Ordinary Kings

You might not realize it, but it takes a lot of behind-the-scenes activity to put on a worship service.

Betty and Dan plant flowers in the beds out front, and lots of our volunteers weed and trim hedges.

We have parishioners who wish to remain anonymous who come on Saturdays to place fresh flowers in the narthex.

Another anonymous donor has altar flowers delivered weekly.

Robert and Paul and Kenny are out front every week to greet you with bulletins.

David and Ned, Jonathan and Rusty, Dee and Tim, Scotty and Eddie help with seating.

Nikki bakes communion bread.

Our musicians and singers plan and rehearse and invite guests.

Jonathan does carpentry projects. Vince and Rick run the sound board.

Our artists create works for display.

Bobby lights the candles.

Four people take up the offering.

Pre-Trial Intervention volunteers clean the sanctuary between morning and evening worship.

Ken locks up at night.

And Rick Garvais keeps me straight. Not only does he set up communion – and he's forgotten only once in 13 years! – but he keeps up with our liturgical calendar. He's the one who places the altar cloth beneath the glass on the communion table – purple for Advent and Lent, white for Christmas and Easter, red for Pentecost.

I have had people express surprise that we follow the liturgical year, that Tandy and I wear robes, that we have a concert pianist. We are definitely a mix of high church and low church.

But I find that the liturgical church year helps establish a rhythm, a common ground, because we have people in here from many denominational backgrounds. So in November, we began with Advent, or the wait for the Christ. Then we had Christmas, the birth of the Christ, then the Epiphany, or the recognition of the Christ.

In late winter, we started Lent, that 40-day season of solidarity with a suffering Christ. Then there was Easter, the celebration of the resurrection of the Christ. Fifty days of the Easter season followed, culminating in Pentecost, that great whoosh of the Holy Spirit.

In late May, we entered the period of the year known as Ordinary Time. It's just what it sounds like. No church holidays. No changing of colors from green. Rick can put it on cruise control.

Just 20-plus weeks between now and Advent when we celebrate the commonplace, when we see where God lives on a daily basis.

I couldn't be more relieved. I love Ordinary Time.

There is nothing more rewarding than recognizing God in ordinary time, in ordinary circumstances, in ordinary life. I am stunned by the number of people who show up here, saying, "I don't know what this is all about, but I feel God tugging me toward this place. How can I help?"

I've heard it from wealthy businessmen and people barely making ends meet, from college students and accountants, from attorneys and chiropractors. I heard it from a grants writer who became chairman of our board.

I've heard it from staff members.

I especially like hearing it from staff members, because I figure they can't go anywhere until God releases them. Whether I pay them or not.

A few weeks ago, I was in the parking lot, heading out to lunch. The noon Narcotics Anonymous meeting was ending, so there were a lot of people out there. A tiny woman walked up to my car and asked if she could speak to me privately.

I invited her into my car office, and she hopped in. She introduced herself as the sister of a homeless man for whom we had conducted a memorial service, maybe four years ago. She said she had been in a car accident and had just received an insurance settlement. She pulled out five crisp \$100 bills, and said it was an anonymous tithe.

Then she hopped back out of my car and was gone. An extraordinary interlude in an ordinary day.

To me, when people show up out of the blue to give of themselves or their treasure, it's a sign of God working in ordinary time, ordinary circumstances, stirring hearts, nudging, pushing, shoving. Because so often, these people say the same thing: *I don't know what it was. I just felt like I was supposed to come here. It felt like I supposed to give you this.*

In ordinary time, without the great drama of Christmas and Easter to distract us, we are free to look at God stripped down, lean, active.

This morning, we're going to look at a time in Israel's history when the people wanted to be ordinary citizens. They actually told God they wanted to be like their neighbors. Imagine that for a moment. You are the chosen people of God, and you tell him you want to be like the unchosen.

But first we need a little back story.

In the years following the exodus from Egypt, Moses led the nation of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. Then Joshua led them into the Promised Land.

For years, they fought battles against some of the people already living in the land. Then there came what is known as the period of Judges. Here's the refrain from the Old Testament book of Judges: **“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”** (Judges 21: 25)

In other words, they didn't follow the Lord's commands.

At this point in history, Israel was a loose confederation of tribes. The nation was weak, and threatened by the mighty Philistines, who lived nearby.

The people thought that a king – like the kings of the nations that surrounded them -- could bring them strength. So they went to the Lord's elderly prophet Samuel, and asked for a king.

Please turn in your Bibles to **I Samuel 8: 4-20**.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.'

⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, ⁷and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just 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. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only — you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

‘¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

‘¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’

The people wanted a king to lead them. The Lord, and his prophet Samuel, saw their desire as a repudiation of the Lord’s kingship. So Samuel tried his best to talk them out of it.

A king will tax you, he warned. He will take your sons to be soldiers and your daughters to work in the royal court. He will take your best produce, your best animals, your best servants. You will end up being enslaved to support this king of yours.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel, and demanded a king. And so he gave them Saul.

What I love about these Old Testament stories is their truthfulness on the faults of even their heroes. Saul started out as a great warrior king, but ended up a mad man out to kill his protégé, David.

When David became king, he committed adultery, then sent the cuckolded husband to be killed on the front lines of war. He paid dearly for it with bloodshed and death throughout his household.

His son Solomon ruled over the kingdom with storied wisdom. And yet he brought so many foreign wives and gods into the royal household that the kingdom divided as soon as he died. There was rot within.

How predictable. How human. How ordinary.

Now the word “ordinary” in reference to time in the liturgical calendar doesn’t mean just “ordinary” in our usage of the word. It also means ordered, or numbered.

But still there is a sense that these weeks from now until late November are ordinary in that they are not marked by festivals or feasts or religious celebrations. And so we can step back and watch God at work without all the trappings.

We can step back and ask, *Are you our king? Or is something else our king?*

Because the Israelites were not alone in replacing the Lord with a king.

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Who is our king? What is our king?

You know, Greenville can be a small town. Years before I came to Triune, our across-the-street neighbors took in the husband's younger brother. He'd had some DUIs and had gone to rehab. He couldn't drive, so they let him live there for several months. He rode a bicycle to work.

Vince and I were good friends with these neighbors, so we talked to the brother every time we saw him outside. He was quiet and polite, a nice guy.

Years later, this young man showed up at Triune. He'd gone back out drinking and using and was living on the street. One day I invited him to lead a Back Yard Mission Day, in which we share with visitors what we know about homelessness. And he bluntly told them, "I'd rather smoke crack than live in a house."

I'd rather smoke crack than live in a house.

Since then, he's spent time in prison. I often see him panhandling in the median of Pleasantburg Drive as he was this morning. Clearly, he's decided to beg to support his habit.

Crack is his king.

"In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves...."

God lets us make choices. God lets us make *bad* choices.

And so when we choose the kings of our neighbors rather than the king we know good and well is sovereign, he lets us. He lets us do it.

How might that be playing out in your life? What king have you placed on the throne, maybe without even realizing it?

For while crack and alcohol can take over the body fairly quickly, many other things can take over a life. Money. Vacation homes. Cars. Food. TV. Other people. Anything or anybody we place before God becomes our king.

The psalmist of Psalm 138 that we read today recognized the correct order of creation: **“All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord.”** (Ps. 138: 4-5)

But the psalmist gives hope where Samuel did not.

Samuel declared **“In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”**

The psalmist says, **“On the day I called, you answered me; you strengthened my life.”**

Indeed, that turns out to be our experience. For while God, through Samuel, established the kingdom that started with Saul, David and Solomon, and went on for centuries through kings of Israel and Judah, good and bad, *he never left his people*. He never left his people even though they wanted another king, an ordinary king.

So it is with us. In the face of a holy God, we enthrone ordinary kings every day. Yet our God never leaves us.

As we enter this season of the church year known as ordinary time, I invite us to think about what kings rule our lives. And to think about what our lives might look like if they were ruled by the king who is anything but ordinary.

Amen.