

A lectionary is a list of the readings appointed to be read at services of worship throughout the year. Our Church shares the Revised Common Lectionary with a number of other communions. For Sundays and certain major feasts, this lectionary follows a three-year cycle. During the season after Pentecost in each of the three years, the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Epistles, and the Gospels are generally sequential. Also, on Sundays during this lengthy season, there are two options or tracks for the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and the responsorial psalms that follows. This year, year B, we will be following the first of the two tracks, which will explore the story of salvation through the era when God's people came to be ruled by kings – people like Saul, David, and Solomon. Today's reading from I Samuel takes us back to the time when the transition to kingly rule came about.

Samuel, the great prophet who guided Israel, had grown old. The people of Israel came to him and told him they wanted to be governed by a king, like other nations in their region of the world. And, although Samuel reminded them that God is their King and warned them of the consequences of having a king over them, they continued to demand a monarchy. So, God gave them a king, Saul, and things were never the same again.

In some respects, what prompted this transition was Samuel's vulnerability in his advanced age. But Israel was also concerned about the threat of a Philistine invasion. Since Moses handed down the Law on Sinai, Israel's strength and protection had been in prophets, prayers, and covenants. But now, they weren't sure that offered enough security. They wanted to be like other nations that had armies, chariots, and kings for protection.

That seems like a reasonable thing to ask, doesn't it? Maybe it seems so reasonable to us because we have lived so long with monarchical type arrangements, relying on government, the military, and the constitution to protect us. It is difficult for us as 21st Century Americans to imagine what it was like for the tribes of Israel to trust in the Lord for everything. Such radical dependence and obedience is hard for us to comprehend.

But it may be that since that day we've never really known anything but a form of slavery to kings and governments and our willingness to accept such dependence so that we can be like everybody else and compete with everybody else may have interfered with our ability to trust in God, in spite of what our currency says.

The story certainly does provoke tension in us, doesn't it? Which god is the real object of my worship? The people of God were not intended to be like other people. Rather, Israel was to order its life in the odd and demanding ways of torah and to rely on the unfathomable love and remarkable promises of God, the Sovereign of the universe and their particular Sovereign.

So, today's text tells us about a time when God's holy people decided that what was to set them apart from others would no longer be their radical and faithful obedience to the ways God had called them to walk in, but instead how much better they would be at being like everybody else – the might of their armies, the strength of their weapons, and the prowess of their kings. They would get themselves a king and an army and show the world who was boss!

Fast-forward a few hundred years. Their plan having failed numerous times, the Jews were living under the occupation of Rome and its emperor. They were still looking for a king when Jesus appeared. To many, he looked like the man for the job. To his family, he looked like he'd lost his mind. To the religious and political establishment, he looked like a threat. But Jesus' came to proclaim the in breaking of a realm over which God reigned in the hearts and minds of those who truly worship God. They would be a people set apart by this distinction wherever they may be and under whatever secular government they lived. He said those who believed in him and trusted his message to be true would bring the influence of God wherever they went. They would be to the world what salt is to food, what light is to darkness, and what leaven is to a loaf of bread. They would not place their ultimate trust in earthly rulers,

in chariots, and horses, and might, but in the power of the God of love, mercy, justice, and compassion. They would not be like everybody else!

Christians are different and our ways are not the ways of the culture in which we live. Isn't that right? Isn't that what being friends with Jesus requires of us? Isn't it our vocation to be more of an influence on the world than the world is upon us? I heard about a man who visited the Soviet Union before its collapse. He thought that as a Christian his life stood in sharp contrast to the atheists he encountered there. During his visit, he made friends with a woman who had been a Communist and an atheist since birth in the same way this man had been an American and a Baptist. One day in a conversation, she asked him, "You are a Christian, right?" "Yes, the man replied." The woman continued her inquiry: "So, how have you lived today differently from me because you are a Christian? Did you ask God what he wanted you to do when you got out of bed this morning? Did you spend your money differently because you believe God is real?"

It was a difficult, embarrassing, and epiphanous moment for that man. He said, "There wasn't a dime's worth of difference between me and the way I lived my life, the things I was willing to live and die for, and the life of that atheist." In a very real sense, that man was an atheist, too – a practical atheist. Why, because he placed his trust and sought direction for his life in the same places everybody else does - government, financial security, military protection, and might. He embraced an ideology that puffed him up with pride when he looked at people with a different ideology. But he flunked the first course in Christian theology.

I missed an appointment last week and it really bothered me. Was I as bothered when I failed to show up for my daily appointment with God at morning or evening prayer or in our gathering this morning? I lost some money in my retirement account when the stock market dropped. It worried me. If I'd lost my faith, would I have been as concerned? I'd rather not have to explore the answers to these questions.

You and I are not called to be like everybody else. We are called to place our greatest trust and highest loyalty in God. Doing that will sometimes make us different from everybody else. One of the ways we are different is that we are called to come here every week and listen to the ancient word which sometimes makes us feel uncomfortable about ourselves, and sometimes makes us feel better about ourselves. We are called to behave toward one another and to handle our differences in a way that is different from the gossipy, polarizing, divisive ways of others around us, so that when people see how our community functions, they will say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if every community of people got along like they do?" And, we are also called to gather around this Table to participate in a covenant meal with God and one another - to remember who we are and whose we are - to be reformed, renewed, and reminded of what differentiates us before we go out into the world with everybody else. We are not supposed to be like everybody else!

Now, I do realize that there are ways Christians are sometime seen as different in a not particularly flattering or helpful way. For example, I was embarrassed for us yesterday when I was on the sidewalk in front of our church here on Winchester. I heard a man shouting at the top of his lungs a block away on the corner in front of Burger King. He was waving a Bible in the air and preaching up a storm – preaching a message of hell fire and damnation for all who did not see it his particular, different way. While I'm proud of that man for his convictions, I have to admit I thought about setting up a sign that says, "If you come to our corner, we'll talk to you about God, but we won't condemn you and we won't yell at you."

I have to wonder some times if we are reluctant to embrace our distinctly Christian identity and way of life because we don't want to be mistaken for extremists. That's surely something to be careful about, but not a valid reason to pursue a course of being like everybody else. It's something we are called to struggle with every day we draw breath. I appeal to you, therefore, to keep up the struggle and don't lose heart, "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 4:18-5:1 NRSV).