

What is the Kingdom of God like? This is a question that people of faith have wrestled with and argued about for generations. In the Gospels, Jesús devotes a great deal of time to spinning parables that compare the reign of God to images and situations taken from the ordinary lives of his listeners. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a pearl, a woman who loses a coin, a sower; it is like everything imaginable and like nothing we know. The kingdom of God is a bit of an enigma - close enough for us to glimpse in our own lives, but not fully realized yet. It is the dream that God has for us, the world God longs to build among us. But, while it gets a great deal of attention in the Gospels, wondering about the nature of the Kingdom of God is not unique to the time of Jesús. These questions of authority, kingship, and God's role in it all have their roots deep in the stories of the people of Israel, including the portion of 1 Samuel we heard today.

Where the Gospels use parables to describe the Kingdom of God, 1 Samuel offers us a story: a story of how God's kingdom, God's dream - plays out on the canvas of human history, complete with plenty of plot twists and unexpected detours. In this story, tension occurs when God's dream collides with human ambition and greed. God adapts, listens, and responds, bending the arc of human history toward justice. Here, God and the people of Israel desire two incompatible things - and through the divine engagement with that tension we glimpse what the Kingdom of God is like.

The issue at hand is a big one: should Israel have a king or not? A human king, that is, distinct from the kingship of God. That question was the subject of last week's reading and it's crucial backstory for the portion of the narrative we read today. Basically, Israel wants to be just like its neighboring nation states, with a king and a palace and all the pomp and circumstance of a monarchy. Israel wants to fit in. They're tired of being the awkward kid at the cafeteria table,

with uncool clothes and a weird lunch. But God has dreams for Israel that go well beyond such conformity. God knows what happens when authority is invested in one, all-powerful human with no checks and balances and God is not a fan of this kind of kingship.

The conversation that ensues between God and Israel (here reluctantly represented by the Prophet Samuel) is awfully reminiscent of deliberations between exasperated parents of adolescents who have been worn down by constant wheedling. At the end of the argument, God acquiesces - “Fine - you want a king? You got a king. But you’re probably not gonna like it...”

And that is where our story picks up today. Under the rule of their first King, Saul, Israel is, unsurprisingly, in the midst of growing pains. They are struggling under the capricious and unpredictable rule of their monarch. Just as God predicted, being royal subjects is not quite what the Israelites dreamed of. So, when Saul’s leadership starts to spiral out of control, God intervenes, rejecting Saul as king, and sending Samuel on what should be a treasonous fool’s errand - to visit Jesse the Bethlehemite and appoint a new king from among his sons. While the old King is still living and reigning. Which is exactly as dangerous as it sounds - Samuel fears for his life.

God’s dream does not hold space for petty tyrants and egomaniacal leaders. God’s dream does not play by the rulebook of human nation states and governments, where rule is inherited through bloodlines and continues regardless of the injustices being done. God’s kingdom does not look like the rigid power structures of this world. God’s dream is adaptive and responsive - when things don’t go according to plan (and they often don’t), God drafts a plan B. God is not afraid to do a new thing; to shake up the existing order; to seek justice, come whence it may, cost what it will. God’s dream is infinitely more than what we can ask for or imagine. And it almost always comes as a surprise.

In pursuit of God's dream, Samuel finds himself standing before a line of 7 potential monarchs, ready to anoint a new king from among Jesse's sons. Seven is a significant number in the Bible, signifying wholeness and completion. And yet, the irony is, despite appearances to the contrary, the picture here is not complete. Even with so many options on the table, Samuel does something extraordinary: he turns to Jesse and asks, "don't you have any more sons? God hasn't chosen any of these." Here it is: the dream of God bursting the boundaries of our narrow assumptions. Where we see limitations, God sees possibilities. Where we are quick to settle for scarcity, God pulls back the curtains and reveals an abundance beyond our wildest imaginations.

And in that abundance, God chooses the person who wasn't even thought worthy to be in the room where it happened. Israel's new king is the youngest, least experienced, least qualified candidate for the job. Someone has to go get David from the fields, that's how much of an afterthought he was. God makes a way where we fear there is no way. God does not see as we mortals see, but with a sight that transcends our limited imaginations.

What does this mean for us? What does the appointment of a king thousands of years ago tell us about the inbreaking of God's dream here and now? Every one of us knows what it feels like to make a decision under constraints, to feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, to feel like we have no good options but need to pick something anyway because life moves on. For so many of us, this scarcity mindset has been the backdrop for the past fifteen months of the pandemic. We have all, in various ways, felt the sting of loss, and the pain of options disappearing into nothingness. We have watched our carefully-made plans be shattered by circumstances outside of our control. We have felt helpless against the raging forces of both the virus and the pandemic of racism, inequity, and violence that it exposed within our society. We

have needed to compromise, to settle, to sacrifice. Perhaps we have wondered where God was throughout it all.

The cost of the pandemic is incalculable. But the past year of extended isolation and restrictions have not only impacted our economy and our healthcare system. On a much more intimate level, it has also shrunk our imaginations and dulled our dreams. When we feel the walls of the world pressing in around us on all sides, our instinct is often to shut down. And yet, it is in these very situations where it is most important to open ourselves, to listen for the voice of God, whispering in our ear, calling us out of our fear, calling us to look again when we think we've identified all the options. Because God is always, always ready to shatter the walls of our narrow-minded thinking and reveal the limitless possibilities of God's dream. God is always doing a new thing. The only problem is, for us to see it, we need to reckon with our brittle assumptions and allow ourselves to be surprised.

So, as we continue to emerge from the wilderness of this pandemic, as we survey our options and make plans for what comes next, I invite each of us to ask with a truly open heart: In our discernment and deliberations, what options have we left off the table? What have we assumed is impossible? Who's not in the room? Who have we written off or excluded? If we want to discover God's dream for us, if we want to know what the Kingdom of God is like, we need to begin by searching in the least likely places. If we want to be renewed, we first must let God kindle our imaginations. People may think we're being ridiculous. I certainly imagine that's what Jesse the Bethlehemite and his 7 eldest sons thought when Samuel picked David to be king. But God's economy does not follow the rules of our world. Again and again, God surprises us by lifting up those people and circumstances that we are quick to dismiss, turning the world as we know it upside down.

What is the Kingdom of God like? What is God's dream for us? What spiritual debris do we have to clean out of our hearts to make room for it? Where are our own imaginations pinched by fear, greed, or prejudice? Because, where we see binaries, God sees limitless possibilities. Where we feel constrained, God stands ready to liberate us into a reimagined way of being. May we trust in that divine abundance and find delight in being surprised by God's dream. *Amen.*