

King Me!

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 17, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson: 1 Samuel 8:4-15, 11:12-15
New Testament Lesson: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

Author James Emery White¹ tells of how in the winter of 1988, nuns of the Missionaries of Charity were walking through the snowy streets of New York City looking for an abandoned building to convert into a homeless shelter. The nuns found two fire-gutted buildings, on 148th Street, which the city offered to sell for one dollar each. The Missionaries of Charity which at that time were led by Mother Teresa set aside \$500,000 for reconstruction; the proposed homeless shelter would be a godsend for New York City. Mother Teresa then encountered the bureaucracy of the big city. For a year and a half, ... the nuns found themselves traveling from hearing room to hearing room, presenting the details of the project. In September 1989, the city finally approved the plan and the Missionaries of Charity began repairing the fire-damaged buildings. Then, after almost two years, the nuns were told that according to New York's building code, every new or renovated multi-story building must have an elevator. The Missionaries of Charity explained that, because of their beliefs (which included a vow of poverty and a commitment to simple living), they would never use the elevator, which would add \$100,000 to the total cost. The nuns were told the law could not be waived even if the elevator would not be used. Mother Teresa gave up. She did not want to devote that much extra money to something that would not really help the poor. According to her representative, (quote) "The Sisters felt they could use the money much more usefully for soup and sandwiches." In a polite letter to the city expressing their regrets, the Missionaries of Charity noted that the episode "served to educate us about the law and its many complexities."

Mother Teresa not unlike the Israelites in our OT reading was encountering a world of complexity and shifting values. For Mother Teresa, it was a world she hadn't known before in the simplicity and clarity of her calling as a follower of Christ.

Perhaps you can relate to that in your life – as today's choices seem less and less clear, as we get swallowed up in new technology that brings more problems than promises (texting while driving is a good example), and as the solitude of ill-health, financial troubles, and personal struggles has us longing for a time when family and friends were connected by sidewalks rather than distanced by cyberspace.

Yes, In the words of Bob Dylan, "The times, they are a changin'." That, of course, is from a lyric written by this iconic singer and songwriter, who by the way, received the nation's highest civilian honor at the White House just a few weeks ago, at age 71, a Medal of Freedom recipient and a timeless poet.

In his prophetic body of work, Dylan tapped into the struggle and the spirit of social change like no other. Listen to the full song lyric and you'll see what I mean:

Come gather 'round people, Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters, Around you have grown
And accept it that soon, You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you, Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin', Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.

¹ Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), 92-93.

“You better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone.”

That’s exactly what the ancient Israelites were thinking when they demanded that Samuel appoint for them a king to rule in his place, a king who would help them swim against the tides of other nations that were threatening them with superior economic and military power. Historically, Israel had been a nomadic people. They lived in tribes that roamed from place to place following the changing seasons year after year. They were a mighty tribe led onward by God to ever more abundant oases of heavenly blessings and earthly bounty. They were led through prophets like Samuel. Samuel provided them with pronouncements of sound judgment when it came to following God’s will. Through Samuel, God helped them to overcome earthly struggles and to make the tough choices they encountered as a people of God, a people seeking to be faithful amid a complex and changing world.

As we encounter the people of Israel in our Old Testament lesson today, we see that other nations have begun to rise up around them. As these nations organize and settle into towns and cities, they begin to enjoy the benefits of accumulated wealth. The day-to-day uncertainty of feeding and clothing your family was overcome by stockpiles of food and permanent houses and towns. And with this came the need to protect what was ours. People who had more food or better houses felt a need to protect them from people who had less. Not everyone was family anymore – not everyone was from the same tribe – so we got more selective about who we shared with when it came to doling out our abundance. And in answer to this problem, the Israelites sought to become like other nations. They wanted the same type of military king to protect their earthly goods, even if it came at the expense of their divine prophet their direct connection to God; Samuel who had, till now, faithfully led the way. Where once they cried out to the Lord for help, now their future was in the hands of a king.

According to Bruce C. Birch,² professor emeritus at Wesley Theological Seminary, “The pattern of outcry and divine answer, which had been Israel’s hope and security from the exodus onward, is now broken (Exod 2:23-25; 3:7-8)..... Under a king, the time of divine answer is ended.” In other words, Israel – that distinctive, covenant community that followed and served a divine King – was emerging into a grown-up nation with all the struggles and temptations of an established people, a people encountering a world of complexity and diversity. And from that point onward, humanity – us included – began the eternal struggle to live faithful, Godly lives amid the complexity and diversity of a changing world. This is our struggle, as we strive to maintain our identity as a people of God. Though the times, they are a changin’, still, we are a covenant people when it comes to our relationship with God.

Lionel Basney, in his book “An Earth-Careful Way of Life³, points to our struggle as a covenant people in a modern world. Basney writes about driving past a church at election time and seeing two signs out front. One was the permanent church marquee, and the other was a cardboard sign put up by the board of elections. Side by side they read: “Our citizenship is in heaven;” (the church marquee), and, “Vote here” (the board of elections’ sign). Kinda funny. But Basney was also struck by the hidden wisdom of these two signs – having our real citizenship in heaven while voting for our nation’s leaders at a church. “The two signs and their apparent paradox,” said Basney, “seemed to ... get things just about right. Here (at church) is the only place where citizens of heaven can vote. Your heavenly citizenship is only as good ... as your earthly franchise,” (or in other words, only as good as the choices we make in our

² The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary; Abingdon Press.

³ Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 161.

day-to-day lives). Basney concluded by saying, "... You will probably vote wrongly (in life) – irresponsibly, selfishly – unless you keep your heavenly responsibilities in mind." And to help us to keep our heavenly responsibilities in mind, to help us maintain our identity as a covenant people, God sent us Jesus Christ. If we stay connected to God through Christ, we can faithfully and successfully navigate the complexities of this world. While apart from God, we turn our lives over to the reign and power of earthly temptations, struggles, and problems. The ancient Israelites pleaded with Samuel to turn their lives over to the reign and power of an earthly king. And following God's instructions, Samuel warned them about the ways of such a king who would reign over them. "He will take your sons" and "take your daughters," says the prophet Samuel. "He will appoint for himself commanders And some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest." The king will amass "implements of war and ... chariots. ... (And to pay for these things), he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards...." This is what humanity chose for itself over and above the reign of God. And while God was reluctant to grant such a wish, God knew from experience that we would only grumble all the louder until we got what we wanted. So God allowed it, telling Samuel, "Now listen to their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them. ... For they have ... rejected me from being king over them ..., just 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" Ours is a struggle between serving the God of Heaven and Earth and serving gods of our own making – whether they be drugs or alcohol or too many sweets or whatever; money or fast cars or big houses; even worries and anxiety and our need to control the lives and the choices of other people – all of these things can become false gods to us, idols that sever our connection to God and to one another.

The next two Sundays, we will continue with Samuel and the ancient people of Israel. Theirs is a story of growth and maturity and the struggles that come with more freedom and choices in life. Their struggle is our struggle. And as we watch how God responds to the needs and desires and the struggles of this ancient people, perhaps we can come to see how today God responds to our needs and our desires and our struggles. For our past is connected to our future, and our wellbeing is connected to the word of the Lord, a solemn and divine word that comes to us through the voices of the prophets, both old and new. Take for example the voice of the poet who wrote this lyric, perhaps even with an eye on the teachings of Jesus. You decide:

The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast

The slow one now, will later be fast

As the present now, will later be past

The order is Rapidly fadin'

And the first one now, will later be last

For still ***the times they are a-changin'***.

May we, as a nation and a people, rise to the challenge of our changing times, with God's help.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, from you we learn what parent is meant to be: nurturing, strong, loving and wise. And for your sake we honor fatherhood this day, and all the men whose love and strength have helped us grow. Thank you for the trustworthy men who taught us about your faithfulness.

Thank you for the men who challenged us to become who you created us to be.

Thank you for the men who taught us to play fair and the men who encouraged us to give our very best.

Thank you for the men who work hard and sacrifice much so that generations to come can have it better. And, Lord, be with any fathers who must live apart from their children, as well as with those who must raise their children alone.

Loving God, we pray for those men who are fathers or grandfathers of growing children. Give them more energy than their smaller ones, and wisdom enough to guide their older ones.

Help fathers and all caregivers no matter what need they are meeting to balance the enormous demands made on them. Enable each of us, Great God, through your loving guidance to foster lasting, life-giving relationships with those in our lives and with people the world over.

For in you Lord, we are all one family. And to you we raise up our voices as one, praying as your beloved children, and using the words that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. **Amen.**