

### *Covenant of Leadership*

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long are you going to grieve over Saul? I have rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and get going. I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have found my next king among his sons." "How can I do that?" Samuel asked. "When Saul hears of it he'll kill me!" "Take a heifer with you," the Lord replied, "and say, 'I have come to make a sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what you should do. You will anoint for me the person I point out to you."

Samuel did what the Lord instructed. When he came to Bethlehem, the city elders came to meet him. They were shaking with fear. "Do you come in peace?" they asked. "Yes," Samuel answered. "I've come to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Now make yourselves holy, then come with me to the sacrifice." Samuel made Jesse and his sons holy and invited them to the sacrifice as well. When they arrived, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought, That must be the Lord's anointed right in front. But the Lord said to Samuel, "Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven't selected him. God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart." Next Jesse called for Abinadab, who presented himself to Samuel, but he said, "The Lord hasn't chosen this one either." So Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, "No, the Lord hasn't chosen this one." Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord hasn't picked any of these." Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Is that all of your boys?" "There is still the youngest one," Jesse answered, "but he's out keeping the sheep." "Send for him," Samuel told Jesse, "because we can't proceed until he gets here."

So Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. The Lord said, "That's the one. Go anoint him." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. The Lord's spirit came over David from that point forward. Then Samuel left and went to Ramah.

1 Sam. 16:1-13 (C.E.B.)

I know we've all heard this story before. We usually tell it as if it's about David and the beginning of his reign as King of Israel. We might also recognize it as a story about Samuel, the story of the last Judge of Israel. As you may recall, Judges were people God used to lead Israel.

But the truth is this story is not about David or Samuel or even about Jesse. It's about the God who searches for and finds leaders to fulfill the tasks God has called them to do.<sup>1</sup> God had done that throughout their history up to this point, calling Moses and then Joshua and then a myriad of others who served as Judges, each leading with divine guidance in times of national crisis.

Our text today is about the Covenant of Leadership, about God's commitment to find leaders and the obligation of leaders to lead with integrity and compassion.

This story actually begins earlier, however, when the people come to Samuel and demand that he provide a king to rule over them (1 Sam. 8:5). They want to be like the other nations who have rulers you can meet face-to-face; they are tired of being ruled by an invisible God who speaks through Prophets and Judges.

Samuel tries to remind the people that there is a cost to having a King, and that Moses warned against the idea (Dt. 17:14-20). Moses had suggested that Kings will raise taxes to support opulent lifestyles. Kings will conscript sons and daughters for duties in the palace and in the King's garden and for the King's wars. Samuel reminds them that no Judge had ever done those things. But still the people demand that he step down as Judge and let a King be selected.

Samuel takes their demand personally, feeling as if he had failed to lead appropriately. God helps Samuel see they aren't rejecting him, but God (1 Sam. 8:7). They are rejecting the Covenant of Leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, p. 169

God reluctantly finds a leader for them, knowing it will not work. Just as reluctantly, Samuel finds Saul and anoints him, selecting him to be the King (1 Sam. 10:1).

In a curious parallel, a search process also follows. This one is done by the people, and they also find Saul and acclaim him King (1 Sam. 10:24).

But it didn't work out the way they expected. At first King Saul seemed to be the right person for the job, but there were times when he came up short. Neither the people, nor God were pleased with how Saul performed.

Now, there is more than one way to read the story of his failure.

- You can read it as if it was Samuel's fault, that his own jealousy caused him to sabotage the work of King Saul.<sup>2</sup>
- You can argue that Saul's mental illness limited his ability to lead.
- You can also argue that Saul began to think of his own advantages, his own reputation, his own capabilities rather than giving credit to God.
- You can argue that he had failed to be a servant-leader who saw his role as caring for the people, more like a shepherd might take care of sheep.

That image, by the way – the image of a shepherd king – seems to have been a prevalent image in other cultures, as well Israel's.<sup>3</sup> It didn't start with David who was a shepherd before becoming a King. The servant-leader monarch was widely seen as the ideal model for leading nations. I think it is part of why Queen Elizabeth was so popular. She spoke in terms of caring for and acting on behalf of the people.

Whatever the reason, it eventually becomes clear that Saul can no longer perform the duties of King. Whether Samuel hindered his success or whether Saul lost his way, it doesn't really matter. And while you can make a good argument that his failings were due to mental illness, there was no treatment for it – which is why David was recruited to sooth Saul's moods with music (1 Sam. 16:23).

Whatever the reason, God decides it's time for a change (1 Sam.13:14).

Did you notice that? Saul was chosen because the people wanted a King. This time *God* wants a new King.<sup>4</sup> God is going to keep the Covenant of Leadership, working through the model of a monarchy that the people requested. Over the course of the next several hundred years, in fact, God will continue to provide leaders; there were 40 or so different kings in Judah and Israel. That's a lot of leaders.

Just out of curiosity, how many of those Kings can you name?

I spent a little time this week looking at their stories again. When Solomon dies, you may remember there was turmoil that led to a divided Kingdom. In the southern Kingdom of Judah, the lineage continues to be directly tied to David. In the northern Kingdom of Israel, there are several short-term dynasties, but it seems turmoil was almost the norm. In both the north and the south, however, God was faithful to the Covenant of Leadership. God continues to provide leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> John Holbert wrote a book, *King Saul* (Wipf and Stock, 2014) that tells the story from this perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Payne, p. 83

<sup>4</sup> Payne, p. 82

Only a handful did “what was right” in God’s eyes, however.<sup>5</sup> The rest followed the pattern set by King Saul, being selected by God but refusing to uphold their end of the covenant by fulfilling the obligations of leadership. They either chose to seek personal gain or sought approval from the wrong people by setting up and serving the various false gods of their time. And in the end, the people suffered.

God was faithful to the Covenant of Leadership, however, even when so few were willing to fulfill their end of the covenant.

Clearly the one who ranks highest in God’s eyes is David, the one who had a heart after God (1 Sam. 13:14).<sup>6</sup> That remained true, even when David revealed his own human frailties and faults. His willingness to confess his sin and seek pardon is part of the reason those errors were not held against him.

He was not only loved by God, he was much beloved by the people, so much so that legend and folklore make it difficult to have an accurate picture of his life. Take, for instance, the fact that there are two distinctly different versions of how David came to meet Saul.

- There is David, the young boy who defeats Goliath with his slingshot (1 Sam. 17:55).
- And there is David, the young man who is good with music, recruited to sooth Saul (1 Sam. 16:19).

In each case, it’s as if Saul had never heard of him before. And preceding both of these stories is our text for today where Samuel anoints David to succeed Saul (1 Sam. 16:13). David will not ascend the throne until after the death of Saul, but when he does, he is also acclaimed King by the people, by all of Israel, not just what will become the southern Kingdom of Judah (2 Sam. 5:3).

In the Covenant of Leadership, God chooses leaders, and the leaders have a responsibility to both God and the people to lead with fairness and justice (Dt. 17:20). That may be part of the reason we have two different, but parallel selection stories for Saul – and again for David. Both God and the people have a vested interest in the kind of leader they have. And in the end, both God and the people want someone who can care for the people, much as a shepherd might care for the sheep.

We see the Covenant of Leadership at work still today. God still calls leaders and still holds them accountable for their leadership. We see that most fully at work within the church, where God uses the process of discernment to choose leaders for various ministries in the church. There are commission members and small group leaders and Sunday School teachers.

We, as a church, trust them to lead and expect them to fulfill their obligations.

And then there is the process of finding a pastor. It is a process that also relies on the working of God in the Covenant of Leadership. Like the selection of both David and Saul, it is not only God at work, however. It is also us – or more correctly, *you* and the new pastor. The process is designed to help the church identify the person God has in mind for Hope Church.

As the chair of the search committee explained it last week, your most important input to that process, aside from prayer, is the survey you received via Email this week. I encourage you to take your part seriously, to pray as you complete the survey rather than rush through it. At the same time, I want to remind you there is a deadline for completion – two weeks from today.

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<sup>5</sup> My own quick search found that only one of those who “did right” was in the Northern Kingdom of Israel; the others were in the southern Kingdom of Judah.

<sup>6</sup> Depending upon the translation, this may be a footnoted “alternate reading.”

As Katie explained last week, any prospective pastor will also fill out the form. The goal is to find someone who has similar priorities to ours. My own belief is that God has someone in mind for us. That person may not know it yet. But I am convinced this process will help us find that person – and help that person find us.

That's what the Covenant of Leadership is about. It's about finding the right leader and holding that leader accountable for leading with integrity and compassion.

I'm glad I didn't have to fill out the form, by the way. It would be hard to sort through those priorities. That is not to say I don't believe God called me to this church at this time in its history. God did some amazing things to make it possible for me to be here. But my purpose here, and my tenure here, is different than that of a permanent pastor.

I like to believe my presence here is also part of that same Covenant of Leadership, in which God has called me, a process in which we are fulfilling the obligations of leadership in partnership with each other.

Years ago I remember hearing about a pastor who retired after serving the same congregation for 41 years. When the new pastor was selected, some wondered aloud how this young pastor would ever be able to follow the previous pastor. "He can't be as good as the pastor who retired," they fussed. One wise woman observed, "that's where we come in. It's up to us to make sure he is as good a pastor as we want him to be."

It's part of the Covenant of Leadership, a covenant in which God finds leaders, and we work with the leaders to be more effective, to hold them accountable for their work, much in the same way that Nathan the prophet challenges King David to be the leader God calls him to be (2 Sam. 12:7).

Like the other covenants we have explored during Lent, there is a promise from God and an expectation on our part. The Covenant of Leadership has expectations for the leaders as well as those who are led. And just as in the previous covenants we've talked about, God continues to be faithful, even when we fail to uphold our end.

And it's not just true for kings and pastors, it's also true for each and every one of us. One of the things I have appreciated about the Kansas Leadership Center is a reminder that we can all lead, leading from where we are, leading from the side if necessary. God calls us to fulfill our obligations wherever we find ourselves. Our task, our responsibility is to lead with integrity and compassion.

When Samuel anointed David, David had no idea what was ahead for him. But God saw someone who was faithful. David must have known there was a party going on at his house, but he chose to remain faithful to the task he was assigned. He was watching the sheep. God saw someone who was faithful and tapped him to become King.

I hope you find yourself lost in the task at hand, no matter what task you have been assigned, and that you are open to the possibilities God places on you in the Covenant of Leadership – whether that be here at Hope or someplace else.

Amen.

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