

As I read this passage, same phrase came up: “Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it.” This passage raises questions that continue to be relevant to our day. When we face conflicts as a group, or as a society, why do we become rigid in our thinking, unmoving when confronted with honest criticisms? Why do we push and push for outcomes that do not serve God’s best vision for us, when another way is possible?

At the beginning of the passage, the request of Israel’s elders for some kind of change from their judge Samuel is reasonable. Verse 5 tells us that Samuel has gotten old, and his sons do not follow in his ways. To offer some context, let us step back to the verses that immediately precede this passage. Here we are told that when Samuel became old, he *made his sons* Joel and Abijah judges over Israel. His sons, in turn, took bribes and perverted justice.

Here is where irony comes in. Earlier in Samuel’s story, he received a vision from God which led to his own calling. In that vision, he was directed to tell the priest Eli, who had become an old man, that Eli’s sons were corrupt, and Eli was unable to check them. Up until this point, Samuel has been presented as a wise leader; yet now he is acting in the very way that he himself told Eli was not pleasing to God. There is another lesson in the text:

we tend to be so blind to the faults in ourselves, even the ones we are called to name in others. Didn't Jesus say something about that? Something to do with specks and logs, I think.

I'll be honest; sometimes I have a hard time with the Hebrew Bible, because I really want to be able to spot a hero. The NT is easy; it has Jesus. But so much of the OT is flawed human beings trying, and failing, and trying again to live out a faithful covenant relationship with God.

So yes, the people's request for some kind of change is reasonable and necessary. But what is not said here is almost as interesting as what is. Because the people of Israel have never had a king before. They do not come to Samuel asking for a new judge, keeping with how their governing structure has been fulfilled in the past. They do not engage in a dialogue with Samuel, their once-wise leader, seeking other possibilities. No, before they even meet with him, they have decided on a solution: they want a king. And Samuel becomes *angry*. Even when they are faced with Samuel's dire predictions of the consequences of their request, they do not budge. He will take your sons and daughters. Now, I have to point out another place I struggle with the text: where it says, he will take your male and female slaves,

I really want the text to read, by the way, you shouldn't have slaves to begin with, because slavery is wrong. But when we read these words, it is a reminder that there are real, hard differences between the world of the text and the world that reflects our values today. Back to the point: the people do not listen. They dig in their heels.

Now we could ask questions about the inherent benefits and costs of kingship, but what is really revealing here is why they want a king. They tell Samuel twice that they want a king so that they can be like the other nations. They are essentially saying, "We give up!" Give us a king of our choosing to fight our battles. They have the opportunity to stay open to the will of God—to speak with Samuel and seek God's counsel, to listen, consider consequences, and forge a new, faithful way together.

But, no. This interaction demonstrates the negativity and injustice that arise when we face conflict from a place of fear and scarcity. We get tunnel vision. We lose our creativity. We stop listening. In our own lives, it is so easy to lose sight of God's way—to spot a problem, react from fear, and respond in a way that gives us a sense of control and apparent safety, even when it violates God's peaceable vision.

For example: Starbucks, closed for training a couple weeks ago. Big story: two African-American men, Rashon Nelson and Dante Robinson, entered a Starbucks in Philadelphia, waiting for a third man for a business meeting. Within moments of their entering, an employee called the police when they did not immediately place an order. There was no reason for her to do so. Different from Samuel text: these men innocent, and Samuel had committed an injustice. But the employee responded in some ways, like the elders of Israel. She failed to respond to the men's simple presence in a just and peaceable way. Instead, she reacted in a disproportionately unjust way: she sought the aid of outside authorities. All she could see was a problem. And without truly listening to the men, without taking into consideration the consequences, she settled on a course of action, one that she believed would remove any responsibility from her own hands. And the result was injustice.

The two men were arrested. Even when their story proved true and the third man arrived and spoke to police, they were still taken away. Now, we may want to see the employee's reaction as an aberration. But we are all guilty of tunnel vision in the face of perceived threats, at one time or another. We shut down. We fail to see alternatives. We hurt people.

The people tell Samuel, we want a king so we can be like the other nations. But Israel is not like the other nations. And by choosing their own king and seeking their own vision of a kingdom, they forfeit their responsibilities as God's people.

This will not be the last time God's people turn away from the Creator's ways. And we will see that kingship produces complicated, mixed results for Israel. But in this case, it is the people's lack of trust in God that lies behind their request. Keep in mind, God directs Samuel to fulfill the people's request. God tells Samuel, Listen to them, but warn them. We have the opportunity to live the way of justice and peace and trust in God that we are called to. But we always have the freedom to turn away from it as well.

Now let's revisit the prophecy Samuel delivers to them in verse 20:

“And 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.” Yikes! What are we to make of that?

There are a couple ways we can think about this. We know that the king they request is one of their choosing, against Samuel's counsel. When we let ourselves be controlled by our own fear and we abdicate our responsibilities,

putting our own ways above God's ways, injustice will result. We must also keep in mind that Samuel is an *angry* messenger here. Later on in Chapter 12, when Samuel delivers his farewell address, he tells the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart...For the LORD will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself." God does not abandon Her or His people.

The best news for us is that, as Christians, we always read scripture through the lens of Jesus. And Jesus shows us what God's kingdom will look like. Samuel tells the people what human kingship will hold for Israel, not the kingdom of God we see inaugurated in Jesus.

Let's go back to the example of Starbucks. How would the "Starbucks incident" appear if the employee, instead of falling into a pattern of tunnel vision, had instead followed the way of Jesus, seeking the justice of God's kingdom? The short answer is, there would be no incident at all. She would have seen the men in their full humanity, and let them sit a few minutes until their associate arrived. But, given that we lived in a flawed world, what can redemption look like when an injustice like this is committed?

We got the beginnings of an answer last month. The two men got a settlement--\$1 each. In exchange, the city of Philadelphia is working Nelson, Robinson, and a nonprofit to establish a \$200,000 dollar grant. The grant will help high school students in Philadelphia develop entrepreneurial skills. Robinson and Nelson are also offering input to Eric Holder, who is working with Starbucks on diversity efforts. Now this is at least the beginnings of a vision of restorative justice! These men did not have to respond in this way. They were well within their rights to accept a large settlement for whatever purposes they desired. But even in the midst of injustice against their persons, they stayed open. They created an opportunity for God's love and justice to flow outward in a way it never could have before I do not believe that God causes injustice. But it is so amazing to see when redemption prevails, even in the midst of our own sinfulness.

I quickly want to bring in part of the gospel passage that was paired with this reading in the Lectionary this week. The text comes from Mark 3:20-35. (Not the whole thing.) Context: some scribes are responding to Jesus' casting out of demons by accusing him of being the ruler of demons. Jesus responds, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against

itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” Now, his point has to do with how Satan would not cast out Satan. But when he speaks of a kingdom divided and a house divided, it struck a chord. The United States is not a kingdom, but I think it is fair to call it a divided house. Incidents like the one that happened to Nelson and Robinson are an all too common result of those divisions. But the coda to the story, the sign of at least the first frictions that might produce a pearl of redemption to heal those divides, give me hope.

As we live our lives in Christ this week, let us keep our hearts open. Let us remember that we are not called to serve our own kingdoms. Jesus has sent us the Spirit to guide us in living the way of God’s kingdom that he showed us. May love cast out all fear as we offer ourselves in the ways that he calls us. Amen.