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Date: September 25, 2022
Sermon: "The Royal 'We'"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:10-20

1 Samuel 8:10-20

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 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.'

Israel's Request for a King Granted

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! But we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'

Alida was up at 5:30 on Monday morning, watching the funeral of Queen Elizabeth. It was elegant, dignified, moving, loving, gracious,

Biblical, Christian, affirming in every way of the Church, faith, nation, and people she was crowned to defend.

It was as perfect a tribute as one could possibly have, impressive pageantry, exquisite music, profound faith.

On Wednesday, the ever-so-mysterious algorithm of Amazon Prime suggested I watch the movie, "Cromwell." For those who never took European History 101, Cromwell was the English Puritan (yes, those never-happy Puritans) who rebelled against the King—Charles I, by the way. Cromwell defeated, deposed and beheaded King Charles, did away with the monarchy, and, over the course of the movie, said some very un-nice things about royalty.

So, I thought, with the Queen fresh in everyone's mind, and Cromwell fresh in my mind, let's look at royalty in the Bible.

Let me give you the short version first. God was against royalty, against Kings and Queens and such. But since people wanted them and nations had them, God spent a great deal of time outlining how to be a great King.

Since that rarely happened, and God turns out to be right, we're still stuck with it nowadays in various forms. So let's make the most of it today.

You heard the Scripture. Here's the context. For centuries Israel's history had been what historians call the "Great Man Theory of History." Great men, larger than life, striding across history, leaving their mark, literally making history: Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Buddha, Moses, Jesus. Even on the dark side, Stalin, Genghis Kahn, you get the idea. Big people, for good or ill. Bold ideas, right or wrong. Power wielded justly or unjustly.

If you read the first nine or 10 books of the Bible, the early history of the Jews, that's what you get: mostly men, leading the way. Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, with a few great women in there: Ruth, Deborah. But when Samuel was getting older,

the people of Israel said, "We want a King like every other nation. If everyone else has one, it must be good. Tell God to give us a King.

Well, you just heard God's response in our Scripture. "Trust me," God warns, "you do not want a King. Seriously, they will take your sons to war. They'll take your daughters to work as servants in the palaces. They'll take your land and give it to their buddies. They'll take a big chunk of all your profit and all your produce, anything you make or grow or do to fund their wars and palaces. And they'll turn you into slaves."

That's God talking 3,100 years ago, Political Science 101, Government 101, Human Nature 101. Sooner or later, human wisdom catches up with God, and we have the oh-so-true maxim, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

But Israel wanted a King, and for the next thousand years, they pretty much got what God told them they'd get. The Kings squeezed the people dry. Kings sucked the life out of religion. Kings corrupted the military. Kings abused every ounce of power. It wasn't pretty. So . . . how come our Bible, our Christianity, our hymnbooks are chock-full of royalty?

When the Bible wants to create an image of God so that we humans can understand God, we are told that God is "King" over and over and over. God equals King.

The most powerful famous majestic piece of music, "The Hallelujah Chorus," has us declare, with hypnotic repetition and thunderous music, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

When the Old Testament starts to predict the coming Messiah, the prophet Zechariah declares, "See, your King is coming." When Peter wants to convince us to be good citizens, he tells us, "Fear God and honor the King." And when Jesus teaches us to pray, at the heart of it is royal language straight from the world of Kings, and so we pray to God, "Thy Kingdom come."

Even in the Christmas story, when the Wise Men follow the Star of Bethlehem, what are they looking for when they ask, "Where is he that is born . . . ?" You know the rest: "born . . . King of the Jews?"

No wonder our hymns pick up the theme. "Crown Him with many crowns," we sing loudly, and on Palm Sunday, "Lead on, O King Eternal." A more recent popular "praise" hymn, reminding us of Jesus's someday return to Earth, has us declare, "The King is coming, O, the King is coming."

And scholars remind us that when King James funded the great Biblical scholars of his day to create the "King James Version" of the Bible, part of their mandate was to emphasize the majestic and royal attributes of God, Church, and faith. The link between God and King has always been forceful. Kings and Queens are anointed and crowned and vested by the clergy hierarchy. People bought into the idea of "The Divine Right of Kings," that God chooses, ordains, and blesses the person on the throne. Until . . . oh, the early 1770s when the far-off-the-beaten-path known as "The Colonies," a bunch of farmers and blue-collar workers and ne'er-do-wells and free thinkers and insurrectionists and descendants of Pilgrims and Puritans, rabble-rousers and malcontents—all of them. They started to thumb their noses at our then King George and mock the King and do away with royalty, and out-Cromwell Cromwell and kick the King out of the house—this house, America.

America grew through the blessing of countless immigrants, most fleeing bad kings, despots, tyrants, and emperors—the whole retinue of royal excess. And we became a nation of anti-monarchist, anti-royalty, anti-dynasty, and one-family rule. We've resisted it. We've fought it, we've overthrown it. And yet, God is described as King, Jesus is called our King.

We easily could have sung today, "O, worship the King" or "Praise to the Lord, the King of Heaven," or "Ride on, King Jesus," or "Praise to the Lord, the King of Creation."

Or, we could end today with the Biblical benediction from 1 Timothy: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever more." Or, we could even sing, "My Country,

'Tis of Thee," which, for the past week and for the next year will be stuck in our minds as,

*"God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King
God save the King!
Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God save the King."*

Why? Because we wish it were so. We wish it could be. We wish that someone, some group, some institution, would so fully embody the grandest virtues of our faith and our nation that we would gladly stand, proudly curtsy, humbly bow, and daily bless their very presence.

It is true that our Bible and hymnbook and Christian language are filled with words and images of God as King, royalty, Lord with throne and majesty. But there's one hymn that tries to remind us that, with Jesus, is quite a different kind of King and Kingdom and rule. Just take in this first verse:

*"The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine forever."*

(Hymn 468, "The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration")

That's kingship, royalty at its best.

I too watched the funeral, moved as much by the genuine sorrow as by the monumental moment and the depths of faith proclaimed in word and song. And I realized that the world coming to a stop and the pageantry and heraldry and ritual and the intensity and enormity of devotion—none of that was because she was a Queen, none of that was because of her longevity. It was because of what kind of Queen Elizabeth was and because of how she lived her longevity.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, preaching at the funeral, captured that essence, lauding her as a "servant leader" . . . joyful . . . hopeful, present to so many, touching a multitude of lives, a leader of loving service to the nation and the world with allegiance to God, and a faith in Christ equal to Jesus's own mother that directed her sense of service and duty."

When God accepted the desire of Israel to have a King, God also took on the mantle of King, and God shared the title with Jesus Christ.

God was saying, "Okay, you want Kingship and Queenship and royalty? Okay. You want majesty and elegance and tradition? Okay. You want the symbolic embodiment of your best? Okay. You want "pomp and circumstance"? Okay, you want someone worthy of your humility yet equal to you in humanity? Okay. Let that be your King, your Emperor, your figurehead, your President."

One of the most interesting Bible Studies we've ever done was the Book of Proverbs, which is exactly what it sounds like: a book of proverbs. Hundreds of little sayings, wise sayings, most only a sentence or two; proverbs to live by.

Probably the most famous one is "Consider the ant, you sluggard, watch the ant, and learn a thing or two." (Proverbs 6:6) It's about laziness versus industriousness, about being industrious. The Book of Proverbs was written as a guidebook for royalty, a sort of "Leadership for Dummies" for young people who would one day rule Israel, all those princes and princesses, noblemen, landed gentry, the ones who would rule government, military, commerce, and religion.

So what's the Bible's advice for a good King?

"A strong king loves justice." (Psalm 49:4)?

"His mouth should not err in judgment (Proverbs 16:10)

"It is an abomination for a king to commit wicked acts." (16:12)

"The king's throne is established on righteousness." (16:12)

"A king disperses all evil." (20:8)

"The king loves purity of heart and gracious speech." (22:11)

"The king's heart is the hand of the Lord." (21:1)

"When the rulers are good, the people are happy." (29:2)

"A nation is strong when the king is fair and just." (29:4)

"A king shouldn't listen to lies, he should judge the poor fairly." (29:14)

Wow! That's pretty special. That's a King or Queen we'd love. It's not about palaces and jewels, not about power, not about bowing and scraping, not about bloodlines. It's about being the clearest, brightest, truest representation of the best we can be.

At our Bible Study this week, we got to talking about Queen Elizabeth and the funeral and such, and someone asked an insightful question: "I wonder how the Queen will be greeted in heaven. Like one of us?"

"No," our whole group agreed. "We become like her. We are all royalty." I love that!

Our final hymn today is "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," No. 5 in your Hymnal

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace!*

*My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread thro' all the earth abroad
the honors of your name.*

*Jesus! The name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life and health and peace.*

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me.*

*To God all glory, praise, and love
be now and ever given
by saints below and saints above,
the Church in earth and heaven.*