

Rev. Melissa Hatfield

I Samuel 8:1-22

“Be Careful What You Wish for Cause You Just Might Get It”

If you are a fan of the Wii game “Just Dance 2” than the title of this sermon may sound familiar. I would play part of the song for you this morning but I’m afraid a third of you would stand up and start doing the dance moves from the game. And while that might be incredibly entertaining for many of us and in some venues might be classified as charismatic worship, it probably isn’t entirely appropriate for this time or place.

The sermon title comes from the pop song “When I Grow Up”. The chorus goes like this: (again, I’m not singing it for everyone’s benefit).

*When I grow up I wanna be famous,
I wanna be a star, I wanna be in movies
When I grow up I wanna see the world,
drive nice cars, I wanna have groupies ...*

*But be careful what you wish for cause
you just might get it*

Have you ever wished for something, got it and then regretted it? Maybe not immediately but down the road. January often finds many people suffering from buyer’s remorse. In December you wanted it and had a justification for why you absolutely needed it. Then, the bill arrives in January and you regret it. Several years ago, I owned a dog. I got a dog on a Thursday, regretted it by Friday, and had my dad return it on Monday. Not one of my finer moments. But had you told me on Thursday that this wasn’t a smart idea and that a few chew toys and kibbles later I would regret it, I wouldn’t have listened to you. I was sure this was a great decision.

Our text today is a tense and emotionally charged season finale of the drama of God and God’s people. And like any good drama, there is love and pursuit and betrayal. Then, repeat for seven seasons. There has been some family bickering between tribes, some fights with neighboring nations, and some infidelity on the part of Israel but God has provided leaders or judges for several years now to guide his beautiful bride, Israel, back to him.

Samuel was one of the Judges of Israel. In fact, he was the last Judge of Israel. Part of Israel’s self definition was that they had these Judges instead of having a king. They were not a monarchy like so many other nations. They were a loose confederation of tribes who had a common history of liberation by their God, Yahweh from slavery in Egypt. They considered themselves distinct and different from all the other people all around them in the region. Their king was their God. Their God was their king.

But in our passage today something has changed. The elders of Israel are approach Samuel and demand a king. They want a king it says “in order to be like other nations.” They no longer want to be distinct. They want to be the same. Scholars believe that Israel was facing a growing and increasingly urgent military threat from their neighbors to the west, the Philistines, and Samuel, the current judge, was old and his sons were corrupt and unfit to lead Israel so the Israelites started to panic.

So, what to do? Trust God to continue to take care of them as God had done in the past or in this moment of uncertainty, take matters into their own hands and find a solution.

When life isn't going exactly as we plan, when we sense a growing and increasingly urgent threat from our west, we too begin looking around for other options, for something to protect us. The Israelites looked around and noticed something that their neighboring countries had that they didn't – they had kings. “in-the-flesh”, “see and touch” kings. And through eyes of desperation and desire, they could only see the benefits. Kind of like the dog. A king - this is the answer to all of their problems.

The elders go to Samuel and state their demand – appoint us a king to rule us, just like everyone else. Samuel is upset about their demand and God comforts Samuel telling him, “It's not you they are rejecting. It's Me.” Israel had a King. God was their King. They didn't need anyone or anything else. It wasn't that they asked for something. It wasn't that a king is an evil concept. The problem was that they rejected God. The God who liberated them from slavery, provided for them in the wilderness, led them to the promised land is apparently not enough to protect them from the Philistines. So they demand someone else.

And not to God's surprise. Because they had danced this dance before. Many times. It wasn't God's first rodeo. And definitely not His last.

I had a significant ‘aha’ moment with this passage in my mid-twenties. Most people grow up assuming they will get married, maybe after college, maybe later, but eventually, you marry. Everyone marries – or so it seems. And if you are a Christian, there is even more pressure to marry because some Christians believe and teach that it is God's will for every person to marry.

I used to pray about getting married. That isn't a bad thing at all. But somewhere in my mid-twenties I put two and two together with this passage. And before long, I could never pray for a husband without ending the prayer with – “but if you don't want me to have a king, I don't want one.” At first I didn't mean it. But as I was faithful to pray it, I eventually did and do mean it. Now, when I tell this story, I always make sure that people understand I'm not saying the husband is king. Let's be clear on that. It is a metaphor. But God did allow me to see that I was dangerously close at that time to repeating the Israelites mistake – which was placing my entire faith and hope in something or someone other than God. Not only would that be a guaranteed disappointment for me, it would be an impossible

expectation for a spouse. I hadn't even stop to ask God what He wanted for me, what was best for me. Was I even willing to consider the idea that God's best for me might be being single? Did I trust God to lead me or was I going to demand what everyone else had?

Some of you might hear that and think "She's given up on marriage." First of all, you'd be wrong. And second of all, you'd be missing the point. Marriage isn't the issue. A monarchy isn't the problem. It is rejecting God that is at the very heart of sin.

Back to the rodeo - What should God do with His yet again wayward children? They willingly and emphatically said no to His plan. I think many of us would assume there would be one of two responses.

The first response: God uses God's divine sovereignty to force them to do what He wants, to stick to the plan. Sometimes I think we live in this bubble thinking that God will always protect us from ourselves. That God will intercede for us when we are stubbornly going after something that is not part of God's plan. There is persistence in prayer and petition that is not an evidence of faith, but rather an evidence of lust and greed. A lazy faith is more comfortable with the idea that God will exercise absolute control and force His plan upon us so that we don't have to participate in the hard work of faithfulness to God.

The second most likely response is that God kicks them to the curb and finds a new nation, one that will be grateful that they have God. God had every right to wipe His hands of the Israelites, to leave them to their king and all the bad that would come with it. Israel was a repeat offender. Surely, God's grace has a limit.

In what should be the most shocking part of this text to some of us, God tells Samuel to let them have what they ask for. God relented. God changed the plans because of Israel's demands and they get what they wished for – not out of vengeance by God or so He could tell them "I told you so" in a few hundred years. The giving of the king was not the result of divine desire, but of God's gift of grace to a stubborn people. The God who grants human freedom is wise enough and patient enough to know that these same humans often will make inappropriate choices and is gracious enough not to give up on them. On us.

God is not a Type A personality. His first love isn't the plan. It is the people. The Word of God backs this up because we see God change the plan on different occasions in response to the people (God doesn't change the end goal but rather the plan on how to achieve that goal).

God goes with Plan B but not without warning the Israelites about what they can expect from choosing their way over God's way. This is the "Be Careful What You Ask For Cause You Just Might Get It" part. God instructs Samuel to warn them of what they're in for. Tell them the ways kings operate, just what they're likely to get

from a king. In warning the people what to expect, Samuel uses the words “he will take” six times. Verses 10-18 are all about what a king will take:

- He will take your sons
- He will take your daughters
- He will take your land
- He will take your money and your property
- He will take your freedom

The difference between God and any other king whether it is a human king or a non-human power to which we give our allegiance, is that all other kings take, take and take, but God asks. With God we always have a choice. Other kings demand allegiance. God requests our faith.

It is possible that if we persist in asking for that which is not best, God may give it to us. Can God use Plan B? Of course and He does. We can read on in Scripture to see God at work through the monarchs – through the lives of King Saul, David and Solomon. In our own lives, we can give testimony to how God has worked even though we went with Plan B. But it is still Plan B.

Is it wrong to pray to God about things you long for or desire? For healing? For a prodigal child to return home? For a spouse? Not at all. I’m so grateful that we have a God who understands us and does not belittle us for our humanity. God is big enough to handle our honest longings, worries and desires and is not put off when we lay them at his feet. We are in good company. Abraham who cried out to God to provide another way of sacrifice other than his son, Isaac, yet Abraham stayed the course trusting that God knew best – whatever the outcome. Even Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest for God to remove this cup from him. To not have to go through the painful torture and crucifixion. Yet not my will be done but yours.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an extraordinary preacher, shares the following thoughts as she reflects on the final moments of Jesus on the cross:

Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was a quiet day for him --the quietest day of his whole life, when he asked for bread and got a stone. Whatever else it was, it was the death of hope--that God might intervene, might stop the suffering, might at least say a word that would make the suffering bearable. None of that happened. God was, for all practical purposes, gone--and yet Jesus died seeking God. He died talking to the Abba who would not talk back to him, giving us the stripped down vision of faith that remains at the heart of our tradition.

When all of our own hopes have died, we still have this faith that seeks nothing for itself--not wisdom, not spiritual power, not rescue from suffering. "Success" is not in its vocabulary. This faith seeks nothing but God, to whom it is willing to

surrender everything--up to and including its own cherished beliefs about who God is and how God should act. This faith is willing to sell all that it owns and bet the farm on one chance for union with God. If God plays hard to get, then this faith will never stop its wooing.

Brown says that faith is a dangling modifier. It needs an object to complete it. Faith is always in something or somebody.

What or whom is your faith in? Is it in a king or a spouse? Is it in another person or yourself? Is it in a religion or way of living? Is it in our understanding of whom God is and how God should act or is it in God, even when God turns out to be beyond our understanding?

One of the miracles of prayer is how it changes our hearts. You start by being honest with God about your desires, what you wish for, what your scared of, what your mad about. He isn't going to be surprised by them and we need to own them and not pretend we have our stuff all together. But we don't stop there. We continue and in faith we pray with hopeful sincerity, "But not my will but yours." And God, through the miracle of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, will begin to help us believe it.

My Lord God,
 I have no idea where I am going
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you
 does in fact please you.
 And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing
 and I know that if I do this, you will lead me
 by the right road though I many know nothing about it.
 Therefore, I will trust you always,
 though I may seem to be lost and in the shadows of death.
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.
 (Thomas Merton)