



## PAPER LANTERNS

### Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 8:1-15

In our Scripture today we find the nation Israel governed by Judges, raised up by God himself, to direct and give justice to God's people. But the judges themselves, the political-theological structure which was understood as both divinely instituted, and divinely guided, had become corrupted and needed change, perhaps a drastic political re-structuring. Amidst this re-organization, two concurrent situation affected Israel's re-ordering. First, Israel faced significant military threats from the Philistines and needed to project significant "strength" and "power". Second, under the judges and by the blessing of Yahweh, their tribal society had prospered and there was a surplus of wealth and resources. Then comes the stunning request for a king. As if their subjugation under the kingship of the Pharaoh had not left any bitter taste in their mouths, their present threat and their economic forces drove them to re-consider a leadership model which historically had been used against them, to enslave them.

The old order has run its course and a new order was being born. There is no defense or celebration of the prior leadership; rather, this new order which was stretching the imagination of Israel. Accompanied by one of the harshest rebukes of a monarchy in all the Old Testament.

As you listen to Samuel, I want us to ask, "What did the people truly desire?"

I will let you in on a little secret I learned from my clergy colleagues: when the news is overwhelming, I make sure to read it and not watch it. This circumvents much of the necessary emotional freight and reactions and allows me to stay informed of the lives and events that effect my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The other night I happened to be skimming some news and came across the pictures of the Covid-19 memorial ceremony in Washington. People were posed in front of the reflecting pool, four hundred paper lamps trailed off towards the Washington monument. Honestly, I have to admit, in the flurry of events and cascade of disturbing images and the anxiety over the threat level to our nation - I didn't give the picture or article much thought other than "Oh, another photo op out of Washington."



Tired. Over-stimulated. Desensitized. Angry. Frightened. Confused. These are the words that describe many of us during this time of upheaval, much like the elders of the Tribes of Israel from Samuel.

In our contemporary re-iteration of the struggle for power, for justice, for freedom which is the Gospel message of Redemption and Hope we know in Jesus Christ- perhaps our trust in God and the enacted faith of our forefathers has been slightly sidelined by our fears, our resentments, our economic duress, our foundational need for health. How have we as a people, as individuals, made our plaintive cries to the Lord God of Israel who called forth priests and prophets, judges and seers, worked through Kings, and established a universal righteousness stretching beyond the unbounded heavens of cascading stars themselves? Have prayer and worship and acts of discipleship, has our faith, directed us with even a shadow of the boldness of Paul who write from Prison saying;

*I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did: for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.... join with me in suffering ..... relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. – Adapted 2 Timothy 1:3-9*

It is so challenging, this time we live in, to be a person of faith, to remain faithful, to have charity and hope and goodwill, malice towards none, when we are surrounded by such terrible machinations of greed, destructive misuse of authority, economic hardship, the tormenting isolation of a pandemic that runs us a fowl in our love for Christian community and the uplifting, nurturing, and life-giving village of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In this warped reality we find ourselves in, it is so difficult to live.

Not according to our works: but according to God's own purposes and God's own grace. It is so difficult to see the world through eyes of hope, trust, and love for one another.

Have we lost sight of the truth of Yahweh as we wrestle with one another, having fallen into some muddy pit, the muddy debris of fear leaving us blinded, reliant on some deformed a half-truth that we are on our won, that our God has vacated, God's sovereign love subservient to violence and the disintegration of truth?

In these days, are we even able name who, or what it is, we actually seek? Might we be summoning a king, when we should be crying out for justice and mercy and loving kindness in accordance with our faith?

I have a short list of movies I love, on them is the Movie Mud. It's a story set along the banks of "The Big Muddy" The Mississippi, where two boys come across an abandoned boat on a deserted Island. They meet a stranger, a Man named Mud, who happens to be living in the boat. One of the boys, Ellis befriends Mud and finds out that Mud is in love with a woman named Juniper and they are going to escape together, Ellis then offers to risk himself and help them. For Ellis, love could take no higher form than that of Mud and Juniper who are propelled by some unseen, unstoppable attraction. Finally, being surrounded by broken relationships, Ellis has some ideal, something concrete to rest his hopes upon. But all does not go as planned and Mud and Juniper break up.

Maybe you know what Ellis feels like; maybe you know what it's like to be used, lied to, disenfranchised, misled by those you have come to trust, those which you believed embodied some higher truth, some permanence, who had an authority in your life upon which your hopes, plans, and livelihood rested. Carol Sagan says this about this form of human betrayal:

“One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It's simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we've been taken. Once you give a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back.” — Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*

And now we know how the Israelite elders felt; misled, taken advantage of, ensnared in some zero-sum wrestling match fueled by fear and the underlying auspice of concentrating and securing wealth.

Fundamentally Israel was a patchwork of tribes ordering themselves such that they could be nimble response and local in design. Yet now there was a call to have “a government like other nations.” Yet Israel was chosen by Yahweh to be a people set apart in religious practice, political structure, and moral ideology. To “become like others” suggests a denial of their divine calling and identity. And so, this monarchy was thus Israel's rejection of Yahweh as its source of life and rule. Can you imagine being Samuel and hearing their cry for a king and all that a kingship might mean?

Come, be our king. Lord over us. Make us wealthy. Fight our wars for us. Take responsibility from us. I will make you powerful and in so doing forfeit myself, and my faith, for personal gain. And in so doing, we will become confused, we shall no longer know whose name to call upon, we will become disoriented as to where true life and hope springs forth, we will forget your hope and love. We will forget you, God, and in our calloused, brawl we will be desensitized to true power- which is an unbreakable hope and trust beyond understanding.

I am going to spoil the end of the movie *Mud*. After lying to Ellis, Mud ends risks his life to save Ellis's life and then apologizes for his lies. Ellis parents separate; but Ellis establishing a loving relationship with both of them. And then comes this final scene-

Mud is reunited with his estranged father, and they reach the Gulf of Mexico, where they flee together. It's not what Mud was looking for, it's not the fulfillment of romantic which love Hollywood elevates to almost a god-like status. What the character thought they wanted, all the forms of love their hopes and efforts were pinned upon had fallen apart and were replaced by loves which was entirely different and unexpected, loves based upon forgiveness, and grace, and mercy. In this sense, the story emulates our pursuit of God.

Even when we do not know what we want or what it is that we pursue: God gives us shape and direction in our searching.

Even when we pin our hopes on the house of cards erected by our human struggles for power: God uses these structures, and us, for prophetic justice, enduring peace, and the nimble redistribution of love.

Even when we ask for a king or pursue some false god, when we choose subjugation and the distortion of power and purpose: God does not recoil or withdraw but through the power of the Holy

Spirit, God continues the work of righteousness according to God's own purposes and God's own Grace.

Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,  
will lop the boughs with terrifying power,  
the tallest trees will be cut down,  
and the lofty will be brought low.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.



On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.  
- *Adapted Isaiah 10:33-11:10*



May the God of all nations bless us this day in all our multitudes and diversity.



May the Spirit of the Lord rest upon all of us; upon kings and presidents, tribal elders and those who yearn to be disciples.



May our eyes be opened to see the enduring hope of the community of Jesus Christ which suffers through all hardship and betrayal.



And with purity of heart may we remember the loss and sacrifice that has brought us to dwell in this most glorious day. Amen.

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Sermon preached by Reverend Nick Hatch at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
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