

“Summer Reading – the Good Kind”
Delivered Sunday, June 7, 2009
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1 Samuel 8:1-22; 11:14-15

School is out for summer, and today the church shifts into its summertime rhythms with this first combined service of the season and the church picnic. Like many of you I will be going and coming some in the weeks ahead, but when I am preaching here I have decided to stick with the Old Testament lessons appointed for these summer Sundays. Reading from Israel’s ancient history in worship has a sort of intergenerational Vacation Bible School feel to it that I like. And besides, as far as summer reading goes, it doesn’t get much better than First and Second Samuel. You know what I mean – not the required reading, but the good kind.

When I was a teenager, about 15 or 16, I was heading to the beach for a week and asked a friend to lend me a book to take – a beach book before I plowed through the school required list of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* or Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. My friend handed me a paper back novel that looked like the perfect beach read. The title was *Eternal Fire*, and it had this shadowy picture of a man and a woman on the cover. Before I left for the beach I picked it up and noticed the author’s name...Calder Willingham...I thought, those are Norfleet family names. I turned the page, “Dedicated to my father, Calder Baynard Willingham...” My grandmother’s name was Ruth Baynard Willingham. I ran downstairs and asked, “Mom, who is Calder Willingham?” And she said, “You’re not reading one of his books are you?” A distant cousin...he was a novelist and screen writer, wrote the scripts for movies in the 1950’s like “Bridge Over the River Kwai” and the western “Little Big Man,” and he was actually nominated for an Oscar for the screenplay of “The Graduate.” But according to my mother he made a living writing trashy novels she would rather I not read.

Today’s scripture reading sets up the stories that will follow about Great King David, with the people of Israel begging for a king so that they can be like the other nations. I wouldn’t call this summer reading “trash”, of course, not this sacred story, but as far as church stories go, First and Second Samuel is a pretty good escape – the young boy killing the giant Goliath, David dancing naked in the streets, international intrigue, nude sunbathing on the roof, adultery, murder, revenge...this is the good kind of summer reading. And in all seriousness, I hope that by looking at these ancient stories of our faith, we will see how God who was active in that ancient world – every bit as complicated as it is today – is active in our world and in our lives.

Preaching professor, Tom Long, has noted that, "The summer months include many different activities and events, all with multiple meanings, but we can say that in the summer, we do at least two things more fervently than at any other time of the year: we play and we memorialize. The summer typically includes several occasions for national, family, and group remembering: Memorial Day, July the Fourth, homecomings, reunions, yesterday’s commemoration of D-Day, just to name a few. Long says Summer remembering is a thumping bass drum as flag-bearing old warriors march their way down the street in a holiday parade. Summer remembering is lemonade and tables laden with barbecue and freshly churned ice cream; the laughter of children at play, church picnics and homecomings and family reunions." Noting that these things, and the ways in which we do them, are no small indicators of what we consider to be important about our life together, Tom Long sums them up saying, "In the summer we remember the formative events – the wars, the marriages, the births, the

groundbreakings – by which we constitute the turning points in the narrative of our public and personal lives." (1)

To spend these Summer Sundays in the biblical narrative of these Old Testament stories is, I believe, to engage in this special kind of sacred remembering. Recalling the figures of Samuel, Saul, David, Bathsheba and Jonathon, and God's involvement with them and their people, we will find these stories to be surprisingly relevant. It is precisely our kind of culture from which the narrative of Israel's kingship emerges: individuals vying for political power, a world at war with itself, a crazy, mixed up state of human affairs, and people who think all their problems will be solved if they just get the right political leadership.

So today, we begin this summer remembering with the formative events of the people of God, by considering how Israel came to beg for a king so that they would be like the other nations. Ever since the Exodus, when God freed the people from slavery in Egypt, God had been their King. But now they were settled in the land, and other nations around them were led by kings and threatening to pull them into war.

Even before David comes onto the scene notice this story begins with a prophetic warning about the ambiguity of political power. It asserts that political power is a necessity for maintaining good order in the world. Yet politics is an ambiguous enterprise, fraught with possibilities for sin and abuse of power. Today's lesson is democracy in action; the people have spoken, saying: We want "a king to govern us, like other nations." Israel is tired of being nothing more than a rag-tag tribe of wandering nomads under God, led by judges who were a mixed breed of prophet and local leader. In order to be a great nation, Israel needs a king.

Samuel understands that The Lord God of Israel is "King," but he serves as the intermediary, presenting God with the desires of the people for a human king, and passing out warnings from God to the people. To lust after a human king, to want to be like other nations who do not know God, is to court disaster. Samuel predicts that Israel under a monarchy will pay dearly. A king will demand taxes, take you to war, put your women to work for him, require a tithe – a tenth of your harvest -- to be given to him. You want to be empowered like other nations, and what you will discover is you will be the king's slaves. But duly warned, the people persist, and God gives in, and they begin their kingdom by anointing Saul. Saul will promptly take them to war with the Philistines, will get in major league trouble with God and the people and will turn out to have a failed reign. But his short-lived season in power will set up the stories that follow about the Great King David. What we will see as they unfold is how God is involved in every aspect of human life.

Today's story shows us – from the outset - how politics and religion have worked out a variety of means of co-existing for a long time. There is always something flawed about human leadership, this story would suggest, and our own experience in local, state, and national levels proves it true. Nevertheless, God does not abandon the human enterprise. God negotiates with the people, and is willing to hear their side of the story. Indeed, in today's scripture reading God actually gives in to the desires of the people. "Even though they reject my lordship, give them a king," he tells Samuel. That is because a long time ago, God chose to be in a covenant relationship with us earthly, complicated, sinful human beings, and God will not abandon the daily spheres of our existence.

What that means for us, as people of faith, is that we are called to live out our faith in the public spheres of our lives. We vote, we advocate for matters of justice, mercy and peace, we confront systems we believe to be unjust, we communicate with our legislators, we go before the school board, we engage in the political welfare of our community and our country. And having

arrived at the end of a week in which a high school student took on the Governor of South Carolina about the stimulus money, which is a matter of public welfare, and an abortion doctor was murdered in his Lutheran church re-surfacing an important political and religious public debate, and President Obama reached out to the more moderate stream of the Muslim world, addressing one of the major religious and political issues of our day, we can see the relevance of this ancient text. As people well acquainted with this scripture, we acknowledge that all political action is conditional, and any political action must never be confused as an act of God. Because ultimately, all human endeavor is flawed, even that which is motivated by faith.

But this scripture also affirms, that God cares deeply about political systems, about local politics, about international relations, and all human welfare. God did not abandon a sinful, wayward Israel to their whims for political leaders and their conflicts, nor will God abandon us in ours. The good news is that God engages us in these conversations as we try to discern what is right, and that above all earthly powers, we can declare God's goodness and justice, how God blesses us in our earthly arenas beyond our deserving. As far as summer reading goes, this is the good kind indeed. AMEN.

NOTES

1) Tom Long, "The Road that Leads from Pentecost: Peaching through the Summer," Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 1988.