

GIVE US A KING

REPAIRERS OF THE BREACH

The First Book of the Prophet Samuel 8:4 "All the elders of Israel gathered together and (they) came to (the prophet) Samuel . . . and (they) said to him . . . 'appoint for us, ~~then,~~ a king to govern us, like other nations.' But th(is) thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' . . . (but) the LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people . . .; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.' . . . 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 (would) reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots . . . and (he will appoint) some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and (some) to make his implements of war and the equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and (the best of your) vineyards and (the best of your) 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 . . . 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 (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.' 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.'

Sadly, as we all know, we live in a divided nation. The news commentators regularly divide the map now into the blue states on the one side and the red states on the other. Supporters from the two major political parties seemed pitted against each other. Americans go on arguing bitterly and dividing ourselves further into camps that cannot talk to each, cannot tolerate each other. So then, pay close attention then to our first reading this morning. For America is a divided nation, just as Israel was then.

By the time of today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the twelve tribes of Israel under Joshua's leadership had already conquered their Promised Land, after that long Exodus

with Moses in the wilderness. They had taken possession of the hills and valleys and rivers flowing with milk and honey, and they had divided the land up amongst themselves according to their individual tribes, living almost like strangers now with one and another, not like brothers with a common history of Exodus and Conquest. Sometimes, one of the neighboring groups of foreigners would intrude into their peaceful existence, tribes like the Moabites, the Edomites, or the Midianites. On those occasions, the individual tribe of Israel so affected would call out to the Lord their God, and God would raise up a military hero to defend and protect them, heroes like Gideon or Samson or Deborah. This was the so-called period of the "judges," the biblical name for those local military leaders. But soon a formidable foe arose in the West, the Philistines, for they were more powerful than any one or two or three tribes of Israel combined. For the Philistines had a distinct military advantage. They had advanced weapons of bronze and so threatened the very existence of Israel who still lived primarily in the Stone Age. In order to beat the Philistines and preserve their heritage, the tribes of Israel would need to join together. They would need to work together. They would need to be a united people. And so they sought a king, an autocrat, someone who could govern them all and go out before them, protect them, and fight their battles for them. And as Jesus himself warns in today's Gospel,

"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." And so the people of Israel imagined that they would be united under a king.

And so they called upon Samuel the prophet to anoint a king for them, so that Israel might be like other nations. But Samuel in today's reading warns them of the dangers of rejecting God as their king. Still the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, such that Samuel the prophet finally relented and anointed for them, Saul, the Tishbite, to be their king over them, but as you shall all see in the readings over the next many weeks, this doesn't turn out so well for them. Soon Samuel had to secretly anoint David, to be another king, to defeat the wicked Saul, and then to defeat the Philistines, and then after many political intrigues and military rebellions, David appointed his son Solomon to rule over the twelve tribes of Israel, and by that time, the terrible prophecies of Samuel in today's reading had all come true. Good King Solomon's reign was so oppressive, enslaving his own people, that upon his death the twelve tribes were divided again amongst themselves in civil war, and they soon split into two kingdoms, the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south, and thereafter the twelve tribes of Israel never again were united under a single leader.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, and neither can we as a people. Our nation these days is so fractured and broken. We are so alienated from one and another, living in our own social and political bubbles. Our elections only seem to be aggravating those divisions rather than drawing us together under new leadership. Our political parties are paralyzed in their opposition to each other, so that nothing gets done for the common good. Those in power seem to be looking only to maintain their power at all costs. There is no standing upon agreed principles now. And so we Americans go on arguing bitterly with one and another, dividing ourselves more and more --- and like the people of Israel in today's reading, we struggle with what kind of government we want for ourselves.

And so what are we to do? What are we as Christians in the midst of all of this political stalemate and deadlock and division called to do? For I see that our common life together as a people is crumbling, that tranquility among our various states and parties is in full retreat, that instead sectarian, tribal and racial violence abounds everywhere, the power brokers are selfishly exercising power without concern for the whole, our leaders are courting another financial crisis, the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the inequality gap between the two grows dangerously wide. The unemployed can't find work or are afraid to go back, and many of the young and

poor have given up, while hatred and anger dominate our common discourse as a people --- while we Christians who should know better, we seem distracted, or powerless. We are sometimes more worried about our precious church buildings and falling attendance, than in working for justice and peace on earth. We have lost our voice in the public square. We have been sidelined.

Instead, we Christians need to speak up again. We need to be passionate for our God; and for God's plan for us, because this isn't it. We need to be mindful of all the people in our communities, not just those who look like us, or who believe what we believe, and who speak the same language as us. We need to be compassionate for those outside our doors and beyond the shadows of our pretty church steeples, people who are still struggling in the midst of this pandemic, people who are still hungry, who are afraid, or disheartened, or disinherited, or simply misled. We need to be passionate again for what Jesus actually said and did and told us to do.

We don't need to be passionate for our own religious or political parties. We don't need to be passionate for our particular tribe or class or race, or our personal point of view. We don't need to look towards any particular individual to be our king, to some autocrat to fight our battles for us, to unite us, for we have God as our king. What we need to do as

Christians is to come together and be a light to the nations, a shining city upon a hill.

The Mission of the Church, the mission of God as defined in our catechism, as you have heard me say you before, and you will hear me say so again, the mission of Church is to reconcile all peoples to one another and to God through Christ Jesus our Master. That is what we are supposed to be about. That is what we need to be doing. We need to be passionate for reconciliation, not self-righteousness. We need to be passionate for building bridges between tribes and nations and political parties, not walls and fortifications. We need to be passionate for unity, for the need to listen to one and another, and to understand one and another, whether we agree with one and another or not. We need to be a model community of all sorts of different people who can live peacefully together with one another, a witness to the nation, where diversity thrives, where all are valued, a place where there is compassion and tolerance for one another.

We simply need to fulfill our Baptismal promises, to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. We need to persevere in resisting evil, and when we fail, to repent and return to the Lord. We need to proclaim by our words and example the Good News of God. We need to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving

our neighbors as ourselves. We need to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being ---- We need to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, as the Prophet Micah proclaimed. We need to be repairers of the breach, and the restorer of (the) streets, as the Prophet Isaiah called us to be. We don't need to go to church. We need to be the church. For a house divided cannot stand. Amen.