

GIVE US A KING



I Samuel 8:4 "All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' . . . (so) the LORD (God) 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. (And) 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 (of your sons) 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 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. . . So, all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal."

As noted in last week's sermon about the Revised Common Lectionary, now used by the Episcopal Church and many other denominations, today's first Reading is the second of continuous Old Testament stories this year about the development of the monarchy in Israel; about Samuel, and Saul, and David, and Solomon. These Readings will continue until late November this year, and yet even so, they cannot tell the whole story because

the Old Testament is so very large, and thus many parts will be skipped over.

So today we are told that after the death of Eli, the priest of Shiloh, all the elders of Israel called upon Samuel his successor to anoint a king for them, like other nations, because Samuel, we are told, was now old, and his sons did not follow in his ways, like the priest Eli and his sons before him. But Samuel in today's reading warns them of the dangers of rejecting God as their king, and he does so in some detail. Still the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, so that Samuel the priest finally relented and anointed for them, Saul, the Tishbite, at Gilgal to be their king over them, but as you shall see in the readings over the next few weeks, this doesn't turn out for them as well as they had imagined. And surprisingly, next week's Reading will tell the lovely story of Samuel choosing and then anointing young David, the youngest son of Jesse, to replace Saul, and then to defeat the Philistines, and then after many battles, and palace intrigues and rebellions, David will appoint his son Solomon to rule over the twelve tribes of Israel after him, and by that time the terrible prophecies of Samuel about having a king would all have come true. Good King Solomon's reign was so oppressive, where he made slaves of his own people to construct his monuments and infrastructure, including the great Temple of Solomon in

Jerusalem, that upon his death the twelve tribes were divided again amongst themselves in a civil war, and they 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 ruler.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, as Jesus warned in today's Gospel, and sure enough each of the divided kingdoms of Israel would fall to foreign powers and be taken from their land and carted off into exile, by the Assyrians in the northern kingdom, and later by the Babylonians in the south. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here, as the monarchy of Israel is just beginning.

So last week, the priest Eli and his sons died as the Philistines attacked Shiloh, an ancient shrine in a city which is never mentioned again in the Scriptures and is thus thought by many to have been utterly destroyed by the attacking Philistines. As noted last week, the Philistines also captured the Ark of the Covenant in this battle, the ark which contained the two tablets of stone given to Moses after God wrote the Ten Commandments upon them at Mt. Sinai. So, what happened to that, that holy relic? That is one of those stories that is skipped over in this series. But I will tell you that the Philistines brought the Ark of the Covenant to the House of Dagon, their temple in Ashdod for the ancient Sumerian god Dagon, and they

placed the ark beside their great idol of Dagon. The next morning, the Philistines rose early and discovered that their great idol of Dagon had fallen on its face before the ark of God. So, they took Dagon and put him back upright in his place. When they rose early the next morning, the great idol of Dagon had again fallen on his face to the ground before the Ark of the Lord, and his head and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold of their temple. Worse than that, the Philistines there began to develop tumors on their bodies, tumors where the sun don't shine, and mice began wreaking havoc on their fields. So, they sent the Ark of the Covenant to another of the seven capitals of the Philistine Lords, this time to Gath. And now wherever the Ark of God went among the Philistines, there was havoc, and so in the end, the Philistines returned the Ark of the Covenant to the people of Israel, to the house of Abinadab on the hill, because the town of Shiloh had been destroyed by the Philistines. In five weeks' time you will hear of the story of Good King David, who will joyfully move the sacred Ark from there to his new capital of Jerusalem.

In today's reading, you see that Samuel very reluctantly anoints Saul as king of Israel, so that they could be as other nations, and all the people at Gilgal shouted, "Long live the king!" (I Sam. 10.24). And Saul ruled for 40 years, we are told, and grew old as king. He defeated the Ammonites at Jabesh-

Gilead, and the Amalekites at Telaim, but Saul could never defeat the threatening Philistines. One time, the Philistines mustered east of Bet-haven with 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and troops like the sands on the seashore. Saul's troops were not surprisingly in distress, and when the Israelites saw this, they hid, we are told, in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns. Some crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead, and all the people following Saul trembled.

In the eyes of the priest Samuel, this was all happening now because Saul had repeatedly displeased God, in other stories that are also skipped over. For example, on one occasion Saul didn't wait for the priest at Gilgal and presumptuously offered the pre-battle sacrifice to God himself, and on another occasion, he captured Agag the king of the Amalekites in a battle where Samuel the priest had directed the Israelites to 'utterly destroy' the enemy. So, Samuel grieved over Saul and his failings. And we are told that God was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Thus, in next week's reading, we will have the lovely story of Samuel choosing and then anointing the youngest son of Jesse, David, the shepherd boy. But this creates a rivalry between the two anointed ones, between Saul and young David, and there is a strained relationship between them both for many years, and much of that story is untold in the Sunday readings, but fear not, I

shall share some of those stories with you in the weeks ahead,
but I promise not to preach on the Old Testament all summer. But
for now, Israel has a king, and his name is Saul. Amen.