

Best Laid Plans

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, June 14, 2009 1 Samuel 8:4-20

File the following under the heading, “It seemed like a good idea”

In 1762, Jamaican sugar plantations were overrun by rats. One planter came up with what he thought was a solution. He introduced an aggressive Cuban ant that was supposed to attack rats. Well, the ants flourished, but it turned out that they didn’t much bother the rats. So now the plantations were infested with both rats and aggressive ants. So someone else came up with the idea to bring in a species of large South American toads to control both the rats and the ants. The toad species flourished as well. In fact, it is now called the “cane toad” because there are so many on sugar cane farms.

The toads did take care of the ants to a degree, but the rats continued to be a problem. So yet another “genius” introduced the small Indian mongoose. Turns out, the mongoose found the island’s native birds and reptiles better than it liked rats. 26 years after it was introduced, several native species were all but extinct. The mongoose also liked the islander’s livestock, especially chickens.

Well, it seemed like a good idea.

Some people of Israel were sitting around one day three thousand or so years ago, and as people tend to do even still, they got to talking about the government. In those days, the government wasn’t very elaborate or structured. It basically consisted of the person most recently chosen to lead the people in the face of some crisis and/or to make rulings regarding the disputes among the people. At this particular time, that person was named Samuel.

Now Samuel had done a pretty good job. No one was complaining about that, exactly. The problem was with Samuel’s sons, to whom the old man had delegated certain responsibilities. The boys were corrupt, indecent, untrustworthy. The prospect of those two succeeding their father was unthinkable.

“Samuel’s getting old. He could drop dead at any moment,” someone said.
“Then what?”

Another piped up. “Yeah, then what? What are we going to do? We need to make some plans for the future.”

Several voices uttered affirmations. “Yes! Alright! Tell it, brother!”

“We have to modernize,” said a fellow near the back. “All these informal structures won’t do.”

A tallish man said, “I travel a good deal, and I’ve seen how they do it in other places, places far more advanced. I’ll tell you what they do – they put one fellow in charge and give him great power. He rules. He leads them in battle. He has a great palace and authorizes all sorts of grand projects. That’s what we need – someone to really take charge.”

“What do they call this man?” someone asked.

“A king,” the tall man answered. “They call him a king.”

“That’s what we need – a king!” the fellow near the back shouted.

“Amen!” several replied. After all, it seemed like a good idea.

That’s how the whole thing started. People who were there at the first meeting started to talk to other people, and those people to still others, and before long it was a groundswell. A king was the answer; it was obvious to everybody. Why should all the other nations have kings and the Israelites do without? Why, if Israel only had a king, it could take its rightful place among the great nations of the earth.

So a committee was selected to go see Samuel, who was, it seems, the only person not in the loop. When the chief spokesman for the “A King For Israel” committee finished making their case, Samuel was dumbfounded. “A what?” he said. “You think you need a what?”

“A king,” said the spokesman, smiling and glancing side to side at the others, who shook their heads in agreement.

“So you think I’m no good, is that it?” Samuel asked.

The spokesman reached out and touched Samuel reassuringly on the shoulder. “No, no, that’s not it at all. Samuel, you’ve been great – for a man of your era. We think you do a super job. It’s just that the new millennium is right around the corner, and we have to get with the times. With the proper restructuring, the new millennium could be our golden age. Having a king is the trend of the future. All the most powerful nations have them.”

Unconvinced, Samuel harrumphed.

“Truly, Samuel,” the spokesman said in a pleading voice. “You’ve got to believe me. It’s nothing personal.”

“That’s what they always say when they stick a knife in your back,” Samuel thought to himself. But he managed a weak smile, and concluding the meeting, escorted the committee out. In parting, he said, “Now, you know I’ll have to give this some thought, and seek direction from God before giving you my decision.”

“Of course, of course,” the spokesman and the others on the committee

answered. There were handshakes all around, and then they were gone. Samuel went back into his private chamber and slumped down. He realized that there was no way out of this that was going to be easy. There had been a time when he could have simply uttered his opinion, and that would have been that. The vast majority would have gone with him. But the behavior of his two sons had undermined his authority. And the people pushing for a king had prepared thoroughly. They had been out in all the villages, making their case for months, maybe years. They knew the arts of persuasion well.

As discouraged as he had ever been, Samuel turned to God in prayer. “Lord,” he prayed, “the people have come to me, as you know, and they have rejected me, the one you chose to lead them. They say they want a king, that they want to be like other nations. Why is this happening to me?” Samuel then fell silent, at a loss for words. Minutes passed. And then he heard a small sound, a swish, swish, swish, like someone sweeping the floor several rooms away. And Samuel listened, because he recognized it as the still, small voice of God. He listened until the sounds formed into intelligible words.

“Listen to what the people in all that they say to you,” the divine voice said. Samuel’s jaw dropped. “Listen to them. Give them what they are asking. And while you’re at it, stop feeling sorry for yourself. They aren’t rejecting you. They are rejecting me.” The idea entered Samuel’s consciousness like an old friend appearing unexpectedly. Samuel recognized it immediately as the truth. The divine voice went on: “Think about it, Samuel. You know the story of my people, all the way back to Abraham. They have always been rejecting my will in favor of their own. Even after I brought them out of Egypt (defeating a pretty powerful king in the process, I might add), they continued to forsake me and serve other gods. So now they’re doing it again. You just got caught in the middle.”

“But this really isn’t about you, Samuel. It is between me and my people. So do what I say, and give them the king they are asking for. Only before you do that, lay it out plainly just what this will mean – what it is going to cost. Then if they still want a king, well, a king they shall have.”

So Samuel went back to the people and he laid it all out. Having a king means giving away your power to someone who will not necessarily use it wisely or well, or even for good. And that person isn’t likely to give the power back to you when you decide you want it back. Having a king means taxes. That palace and those grand projects – they cost money, your money. A king will always be ready to take your best, whatever it

might be – sons, daughters, animals, crops – for his use. The day will come when you will complain bitterly to God about your kings. But the people were insistent. “We want to have a king. We want to be like other nations,” they said. To the people, it still seemed like a good idea. And so, as God had directed Samuel, their wish was granted.

This is a story we ought to know better than we do, because people generally (and the people of God in particular) are still prone to this particular sort of waywardness. We think the remedy to our problems is some newfangled technique, some new structure, some new leader with all the answers and the resources. We pay too little attention to the ways that new techniques and structures, while sometimes helping to clarify the old message, can also obscure it. And we pay too little attention to the fact that buying into dependency on other human beings usually turns out badly, blinding us to the strengths in ourselves, making us deaf to other voices and worst of all, making us forget our moment-to-moment dependence on God.

The question we need to ask is not, “What new system or what special individual can save us?” but rather, “What does it mean to be the children of God, witnessing to the faithfulness of God in every possible way?” And, “How are we called to be different – to stand apart as a testimony to the nature of God?”

Our God is faithful, of course, and no telling of this story would be adequate without mentioning that even when the people insisted on a king, and later experienced exactly what Samuel had predicted, God continued to offer the possibility of redemption through confession and repentance. And when the people of Israel were carried off into exile, as just punishment for their willful disobedience, there were tears on the cheeks of the Divine Judge. And God did restore the people, through the return from captivity, and later expanded the people through the extension of salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

To put it simply, our bad choices – even those we make willfully, after being warned – cannot and will not deter God from his purpose and plan, which is to call a people for himself, a people to be his own and to experience his blessing so that they might become a blessing to others. But the faithfulness of God is not our excuse to disregard God’s will and our part in it. It is the very faithfulness of God that is meant to inspire us to place our trust in God rather than in new techniques, new structures or new gurus. It is this faithfulness of God which is meant to give us the confidence to remain faithful even when being faithful makes us feel more vulnerable.

I remember once, when I was young, I was out in a hayfield and an angry

yellow jacket started circling me. My grandfather urged me to stand still, perfectly still. I was not inclined to do so. I found myself thinking, we need a newspaper or a flyswatter or the bug spray from the barn. But my grandfather kept insisting, as I flinched one way and another, "Just stay still." Finally, in a panic, I decided to fight back. I took a swat at the yellow jacket. It seemed like a good idea.

As we sat on the bank of the creek, where Grandpa found the blue clay mud near the spring to put on the places where I'd been stung, I realized I should have trusted him.

Sooner or later, we all learn the same thing about trusting God.

Amen.