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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
June 10, 2012
“The Ways of the King”
I Samuel 8:4-20

Read the scripture online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=206609080>

One of the traditions of the United States Senate is the annual reading of George Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address ([read the speech](#)). During the early years of the Civil War, then-Senator Andrew Johnson proposed in 1862 that the Senate reflect on our nation’s core values by hearing again Washington’s words of advice as he prepared to leave office. In his address, Washington spoke about many things, including the danger of defining America according to regional identities, a poignant theme in Johnson’s days in light of the Civil War being battled. In 1896, the Senate began a tradition of reading Washington’s speech every year, although I’m not sure the wisdom of Washington’s words has had much impact on our Senators’ decisions. For example, Washington strongly warned against holding “habitual hatred” against some nations and a “habitual fondness” for others, because such emotions make us slaves to our animosity and affection and are apt to lead us astray into pathways of war that run counter to our national ideals and values. I fear our former president wantonly disregarded Washington’s advice, even as our current president has failed to fully heed Washington’s warning.

It is worth noting that Washington also insisted that we cannot expect national morality to prevail “in exclusion of religious principle.” This is not a call for a theocracy, but rather for a democracy humbly guided by the deepest truths of religious morality. We may be tempted to believe that politics is what happens out there, while piety is what happens in here, but there has never been a time in biblical history when questions of faith and government were not intertwined. Love God – love your neighbor. Serve God – serve those in positions of authority over you. The hard question is how to do both these things faithfully.

The inspiration for re-reading Washington’s Farewell Address came during the Civil War, to hear words from the time of the nation’s founding even as that same nation was in danger of being torn apart. A similar inspiration is behind the story of Samuel being asked by the elders of Israel to anoint a king for them, because this story was eventually written down centuries later, when the kingdom of David had splintered into two warring nations at risk of being conquered by foreign powers. There the writer stood, in the shadow of the throne of Jerusalem, looking back over a history of war and division and wondering whether the people had chosen the right path or not. They looked over the cemeteries of those killed in battle, past the fields and livestock taxed by the king’s estate, over the rooftops beneath which slaves and laborers toiled for their masters and rightfully asked, Where is God in all of this? Their question is our question, too.



The leaders came to Samuel and said, "You are old and frankly we don't like your sons, so name a king who will govern us." So Samuel prayed to the Lord, and in scripture the Lord answered him with two words of advice: 1) *Don't take this personally, because they are not so much rejecting you as they are rejecting me;* 2) *Solemnly warn them about the consequences of this action.* Samuel did as the Lord instructed him. He warned the leaders that the ways of the king who rules over them would involve turning their sons into soldiers, turning their daughters into servants of those in power, turning the produce of their fields into feasts reserved for the tables of the powerful, and seeing a tithe of all their resources taken from them thenceforth and forevermore. The warnings seemed to fall on deaf ears. It was like patients in the hospital who are told by their doctors what sort of care they need and yet who refuse that advice and insist on being released A.M.A., against medical advice. Here we have a case of A.P.A. – people acting "against prophetic advice" and replacing the yoke of the Lord, whose burden is light, with the heavy yoke of a king on his throne.

The saddest part of this whole conversation is the reason the people gave for wanting a king, namely, they wanted a king to govern them "like all the other nations." Everybody else has a palace and a king on a throne; everybody else has a Game-Boy and an X-box, a BMW, and a Rolex, a standing army and a stockpile of nuclear weapons. Why shouldn't we? The elders of Israel wanted to be like everyone else, with a king to fight their battles, and plenty of swords and chariots to give them a sense of military security. But the whole point was that they were created to be a nation unlike all other nations. They were led out of slavery in Egypt so they could be God's people. They stood at the base of Mount Sinai and entered into a covenant with the one true God. They would cry out and pray to the Lord in their time of need and the Lord would answer them. But now they chose to step away from the trust inherent in the ancient covenant to step under the authority of a king, who would place obligations on them that would take precedence over what the Lord required of them. Long ago, God had acted to free them from slavery; but now, as Samuel poignantly warned them, with the naming of a king, you would once more become slaves.

God doesn't call us to be like other nations. Granted, a democracy in theory is less oppressive than a monarchy, but it remains a fragile and messy form of government. The people in power back in Samuel's time were likely those with significant wealth and resources who wanted someone on the throne who would protect their assets. Likewise, the people with power today work hard within the halls of democracy to ensure that their assets and privileges are protected by any and all means possible. George Washington warned against those who would affect alteration in the Constitution so as to "impair the energy of the system and to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown." Think of the partisan politics and refusal to compromise that has turned the current Congress into a consort of "do-nothings." Think of those who would starve the federal programs of public support and welfare by shrinking legitimate tax liabilities. Think of Supreme Court justices whose flawed logic of strict "originalism" is "activism masquerading as restraint," serving only to impede any progress in the causes of civil justice.¹ It is not right. God does not call us to be a nation like other nations. Period.



In the same way, God does not call us to be a community like other communities. We are not to be a country club disguised as a church, a place designed to protect tradition at all costs, a gathering that safeguards privilege at the expense of full inclusion and radical hospitality. To the best of our ability and by the grace of God, literally, we are no longer anyone's slaves but all sisters and brothers in Christ. We are not to be defined by categories of the world, prejudices of the populace, or biases of big business; rather we are defined by the model of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. God did not call us to be like other people, to do things like other groups, to live as if this world's power and reality are all that's real. God calls us away from that into new life in Christ. Period.

For some people that has meant they are pacifists dedicated to ending all war. For others, that means they serve in the military with a spirit of compassion and hope, just as others serve as medical missionaries in hospitals near war zones. For some people this means they challenge the halls of power from without, with petitions and citizen actions and votes cast on election days so that the rights of the minority are never trampled by the fears and prejudices of the majority. For others, that means they seek elected office and community service, doing the best they can to unite faith values and political policy. It is never a one side or the other, clear-cut process. Politics is messy and complicated, just as living a life of faith is messy and complicated. Why? Because both involve us: fragile, flawed, fearful creatures that we are.

When Samuel brought the leaders' request to God, God reminded him that the desire for a king was not a rejection of Samuel, but a rejection of the Lord. But God did not argue or rage or retaliate against this choice of theirs. God didn't endorse the idea of a king, but neither did God forbid it. God instead remained constant, even when we were inconstant. So kings were named and the prophetic words of Samuel came true. Battles were fought, blood was spilled, wealth was appropriated, but God remained the only power worthy of full trust for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. And after the throne was destroyed and the people were first sent into exile and later returned home—but under the oppressive rule of other kings—God remained God. And at last, in the fullness of time, God came in the form of a child, who grew to walk in the people's midst, healing their wounds, speaking truth to power, and conquering all ill spirits of death with the true spirit of resurrection life.

The ways of the king only make sense when seen in light of and in contrast to the ways of Christ the King. It is so true that we are here in the world, but are not to be of the world. Let the ancient affirmation of faith from old be written still upon our hearts and spoken by our lips: *Hear, O America, the Lord our God is one God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* To God alone is our first allegiance, our hope, our passion, and will and spirit.

AMEN

¹ This latter phrase comes from an article by Jeffrey Rosen, "Against Interpretation," NY Times Book Review, March 18, 2012; reviewing Harvie Wilkinson's [Cosmic Constitutional Theory](#).

