1 Samuel 8:4-20

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Mark 3:20-35

There is a tug-of-war going on in our first reading and in such conflicts, there is always a winner and a loser. In this particular tug-of-war, the loser is God.

This conflict – like so many conflicts today – was about politics. The people of Israel wanted a king. God, through the prophet Samuel said, “You really don’t want a king.” And to drive home the point, Samuel said:

“A king will take your sons to drive his chariots and plow his ground; reap his harvest; make implements of war and equipment for the chariots. Your daughters will become the king’s servants, too. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and orchards. He will tax your income and help himself to your male and female slaves, your flocks, cattle and donkeys.”

I think that would have convinced me. I would have voted for Samuel’s candidate: God. But the people insist, and God gives them what they want.

Up until this point in its early history, Israel was governed by judges who presided over legal disputes. But their main job was defending the nation. They were army generals. There was Jephthah and Gideon; Samson (of Samson and Delilah fame) who defeated the Philistines. And there was Deborah – the lone woman of the group – who led the people to victory over the Canaanites.

The judges of Israel were divinely chosen and appointed. They were the ambassadors of God so that in truth, the king of Israel was God. But the people wanted an earthy king, as they said: like other nations. They wanted to take the leadership of Israel out of God’s hands and deal with it themselves.

What does that sound like to you? Control issues? Trust issues? A longing for certainty over anxiety? All of these are real dynamics of the spiritual life. They are things we must all contend with.

And the difficulty is that we cannot go to the polar opposite of these issues in an attempt to resolve them. Take control, for example. To have no control is its own form of a control issue. The antidote to being a controlling person is not to be out of control. It doesn’t work that way. There has to be a middle ground.

I remember when I was learning how to ski. I was 40-years-old. Go ahead and laugh. All you native Coloradans were skiing before you could walk. I was learning to ski as an adult and loving it. I have always loved going fast. The problem is that when you are on skis, you go faster and faster. I remember it as feeling out of control.

Furthermore, I didn’t know how to stop. The only way I could stop was to fall down. Soon I learned to dig my skis into the snow to stop. But still being new to the sport I was terrified of that out-of-control feeling. So when I wanted to stop, I REALLY dug by skis into the snow. Almost down to the dirt. I was too controlling.

Was that skiing? Vacillating between being out of control and so controlling that I couldn’t move at all? Eventually I learned a middle way. I learned to be in command of my skis and my body. I learned that I could govern where I went, how fast or slow I went, and how to stop without needing to fall down. And it was a wonderful feeling: this feeling of command.

The same dilemma is true for trust issues. Some people say, “I don’t know how this will work out. I’m just going to trust that God will take care of it.” That sounds very noble. But it isn’t. It is a way of absolving you of any agency in your own life. It’s like the person who can’t decide how much to tithe to the church. So he throws all his money in the air and says, “Anything you catch, God, you can have. I’ll keep whatever falls back down.”

When we trust God, we don’t unplug our brain from the rest of our bodies. We still have decisions to make. We have to plan; to budget; to risk. But to go to the extreme is to say, “God gave me a brain so I’m going to figure this out, all of it, down to the tiniest degree.” Those are the two extremes of trust: being brainless and being brain-full.

Trusting God means just that. Trust that God is with you, kindly. God is for you. God is on your side and wants what is best for you. Many people have a hard time believing that. For them, God is counting their offenses; waiting for them to trip up. Or God is just neutral and doesn’t really notice them or care what happens to them. That isn’t how the universe is wired because beneficence or goodness is the cycle of life.

Accepting the good presence of God is the middle way of trust between being brainless and brain-full or full of ourselves.

And yet, we don’t do these things in a spiritual vacuum.

With a system of divinely appointed judges, you never know who’s going to govern next. With a king, on the other hand, you’ve got yourself *real* certainty. It’s called dynastic succession. As soon as there is a royal birth you know who the next monarch will be. There’s a downside to this certainty, though. With it comes the real possibility of bad leadership. Not all royal descendants have what it takes to govern.

This tug-of-war is about certainty and relationship.

The sacred text conveys this as primarily about *relationship*; about the dynamic of rejection and distancing. The people want a little bit less of the Divine Life. They want to trade it for something else. They want to trade God for certainty. This is one of the most compelling dramas in the spiritual life: we all face it at one time or another. You can almost hear the heartbreak of the Divine Life, called Yahweh, who says, “They have not rejected you, Prophet Samuel; they have rejected me from being king over them.”

Admittedly Plan A was fairly “squishy” –

But now we’re at a turning point. Why? What brought about this moment in history? We can only speculate but there must have been a confluence of factors. Perhaps maintaining this ideal of having Yahweh, the Divine Life, as their king had just become untenable; too insubstantial for those who like things concrete and tangible. Perhaps international affairs had become so complex that people lost faith in the old system. Perhaps they had so grown in their national identity and cohesiveness that they wanted to be like everyone else. Everyone else has a king. Why can’t we?

Please note that none of these things is necessarily bad, right? There’s nothing wrong in longing for the concrete and tangible. That’s why we have church buildings. We could stand outside in the rain and worship but a building is a tangible marker that we love God. A desire for predictable national security isn’t a bad thing and desire for national identity is good. “Let’s have a flag! Let’s have a national anthem!”

What these things have in common is that they are all very human. They all showcase the human desire to be in charge; to be in control. If we wonder when our society started to become more secular – who knows – maybe secularism has its roots right here at this moment in ancient Israel.

Because what these people wanted was a way to be less reliant on God. And with less reliance comes less relationship. With less relationship comes much less intimacy.

What the people wanted was doable but for a price. Yahweh is very clear – and to my reading – fairly objective and impartial about stating the cost. It simple needed to be weighed and counted:

In the end, Yahweh says, “You will become his slaves.”

There is peril in kingship. It allows a few to usurp rights and privileges of the many. A society structured like a pyramid, with a few positioned at the top, siphoning resources from the many down below is a blank check for exploitation. The best of your fields: gone. Your flocks and cattle and donkeys: gone. Your sons and daughters: gone. Humans harming humans was not Yahweh’s idea. Humans doing harm to other humans is the price paid for less reliance on the Divine Life.

But the people wanted to be like everyone else. This is the power of conformity and sameness. They wanted to be like their neighbors. They wanted what everyone else had, not unlike any of us who want the same cellphone everyone else has. Conformity is a powerful factor in human life. It is what can lead a teenager to drugs and alcohol. It can lead people to live beyond their means. Conformity is what compelled these ancient people to agitate for a “real” king.

So God relented. The people won. It’s important to say that the blessing and presence of God was not lost even if relationship was diminished. God chose – and blessed – the first king, Saul, and the second king, David. But you have to wonder what would have happened had the people stuck with Plan A – God as the people’s king, ruling through divinely inspired leaders without hierarchy or dynastic succession.

God’s plan was kind of wacky when you think about it: a kingdom without a king. I have a hard time imagining what Plan A would have looked like down the years, especially as international relations and economics became more complex.

But I have to believe that following Plan A would have had a good outcome. And if I believe that, then I also have to believe that whatever God’s plan is – no matter how wacky – is also good. That’s what reliance on the Holy teaches us. No matter how strange something may appear to us, if God’s Spirit is in it, we can be confident of a good outcome.

The contemplative life is a good example. Nothing seems wackier than sitting on a chair or on the floor for 20 minutes a day in silent meditation. And yet all the spiritual masters have done this, likely going back to Jesus himself. We do it, if for no other reason, to be freed for 20 minutes from the tyranny of our own ego and the noise of our own mind. We do it to allow God to work deeply inside us, healing and transforming us in ways we can’t directly influence or control. We do it – this prayer of silence – to come more intimately into the presence of the Holy.

The contemplative life is only one example of how strange God’s plan may seem. Another example is the Gospel life. When you think about it, the Gospel goes in the opposite direction of almost every Human impulse. When someone has hurt us we want to hate. The Gospel says love. When something troubles us, we want to worry. The Gospel says “give no thought to what you shall eat, or drink or wear.” When we are oppressed, we want to push back. The Gospel says “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” That particular passage from Matthew’s Gospel continues with:

“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (5:42)

We tend to always think we have the best plan. At least, it’s the best we can come up with and we’re no slouches. In this room alone there are multiple centuries’ worth of combined lived experience. But God may have another plan.

God’s Spirit is often about what is new, evolving in Creation, and blossoming forth. Which is good because we are always “becoming” and blossoming forth. Always we are being called into newness in our own existence, building upon and fulfilling what has already been. That’s just like Jesus. He said he had not come to destroy but to fulfill.

Out of fear or inertia or our own desire to be in control, we can do what those ancient Hebrews did: minimize God’s influence in our lives; substitute the known for the unknown; become like everyone else. Or we can stay with Plan A. However squishy or wacky God’s plan may seem to be, it always means having more of the Holy One in our lives. It always means more of us becoming more like God.

The significance of an anthropological way of reading the Bible, and the shape of our salvation in Jesus Christ, can be summed up with a quote from acclaimed biblical scholar Walter Wink (1935-2012). Wink was an early supporter of Mimetic Theory, helping to launch the Girardian guild of researchers, the Colloquium on Violence & Religion ([COV&R](http://violenceandreligion.com/)), in 1990. As he looked back over his own life and career in his memoir, [*Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Human*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0307955818/girardianreflect), he poignantly writes,

And this is the revelation: God is HUMAN … It is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness. Only God is human, and we are made in God’s image and likeness — which is to say, we are capable of becoming human. (p. 102)