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Our Imagination Gap

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This month we follow the lectionary through the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel. We learn of God's desire for human flourishing among men and women just like you and me.

Some rise to legendary status with their feats of courage while others fall into inept greed. Sometimes it is the hero who both rises to a pinnacle before plummeting in dismal failure. Each story plumbs the human character revealing passions for security, a tendency towards faith, family loyalty, and deep vulnerabilities.

Laced throughout, God pursues us with grace to begin again and again.

Here is where we pick up on our story.

After a confused night of hearing someone call his name, a young boy, Samuel, returns to his bed to wait for God's call.

He says, "speak, your servant is listening." God speaks. The text tells us that God's words make Samuel's ears *tingle*, but not a good tingle. Think "singe."

This young boy hears and then relay's God's message to Eli, the man who serves as priest and judge and to whom Samuel is apprenticed.

God is angry about Eli's sons. They abuse women. They corrupt the rituals. They accept bribes, putting money and power above God.

Despite this caution, from God no less, Eli allows his sons to lead the Israelites into battle, making a mockery of themselves against the Philistines. Such nepotism cost them their lives.

Through stories as fantastic as Hollywood action thrillers with God causing plagues to rain down on the Philistines and their idols becoming mysteriously mutilated, the enemy slinks away in fear.

Upon their surrender, Samuel, who is now in charge, persuades those Israelites who doubted God's care to put away their flimsy idols and devote themselves to God.

Things go very well.

Scripture records, Samuel's rule pleases God and the people until he becomes old and positions his sons to inherit his role. As if he did not recall the time when his ears tingled to a crisp.

Dear God,

*These stories charm us as if a fable and
also trouble us when these human tendencies ring true in our ears.*

Silence our skepticism and doubt.

*Send your spirit among us as so that we hear your word
as clearly as so many centuries ago.*

Amen.

1 Samuel 8:4-20

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and 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.”

⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

⁸Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king.

¹¹Samuel said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you:

he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots,

¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

¹³*He will take* your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

¹⁴*He will take* the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.

¹⁵*He will take* one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

¹⁶*He will take* your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work.

¹⁷*He will take* one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

¹⁸And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you on that day.”

¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also

may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

Samuel is a good leader, until he isn't.

When the Israelites got Samuel instead of Eli's sons to serve as judge, they thought they were done with people grabbing power based upon family inheritance. Samuel's decision to appoint his inept sons shines a light on his human fault. The people see it too.

They want out of this system of leadership based upon judges who appoint their own greedy children to take over. In their limited imagination, the Israelites demand what others have rather than cherish what God has already given.

They want *to be given* a monarch. (Verbs always point to the core teaching.) God warns a monarch *will take* and the English translation of the Hebrew fails to convey the intensive force of what will be ripped from their lives.

The monarchy *will take* what is most precious first – family. They *will take* your sons and place them at the beginning of the battleline, to fight in the most vulnerable positions. The monarchy will renew the cadence fighting against *its* enemies. The monarchy *will take* your daughters into their mansions as instruments to please them

and their friends. The monarchy *will take* your means of working, your land, and your animals, the best of your best to secure the loyalty of their supporters.

Bribery starts at the top, descending until the common folk possess nothing to parlay in the game of power and greed.

As your capacity to sustain yourself, the monarchy *will take* your freedom, weakening the community, until everyone, including the monarch, becomes enslaved.

When the people set themselves under the whims of a monarchy, they become like puppets on a string until they succumb to exile, yet again. ¹

As I've pondered this story, myriad TV series and movies sprang to mind. *Game of Thrones* captured our attention with dragons and kings. Most recently *Succession* dominated the ratings. A media mogul plays a divisive game as his children jockey to be anointed heir to his dynasty. That word "dynasty" leads us to even older dramas of *Dynasty* or *Dallas*.

Remember the question that captivated our nation as a season finale of *Dallas* ends with a gun shot and everyone questions "who shot JR" since so many foes populated this charade. Everyone loses

¹ David H. Jensen, *1&2 Samuel, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

in these dramas, even the one who receives the prize. The empire handed to them is infested with deception and predators who plot the winner's demise. These shows appeal to our desire for a "strongman." A larger-than-life figure with prowess and grit. A shrewd wheeler dealer.

In the evening, after grinding away at the day-to-day and we fall exhausted on the couch, we like the idea of a person who is stronger and more capable than us to fight our battles.

That was the Israelites' desire – find someone to fight their battles for them. But, they knew better. They knew that whenever people give their loyalty to someone, hoping for a strongman, he won't be *their* strongman. Loyalty goes one-way, only.

Timothy Snyder, historian at Yale University has visited regions in Ukraine where Russia imposed its occupation regime. He spent decades reading testimonies of people who lived under Nazi or Stalinist rule, has seen death pits, some old, some freshly dug. He writes from testimony given by friends who have lived under authoritarian regimes.

Snyder argues that the fantasy of a strongman begins with a notion that this person will unite the nation. It may begin that way, but the strongman builds unity by defining those who belong and those who do not. Doesn't this sound familiar to the Israelites who want to be

united like the other nations so they can prevail against those nations?

The strongman illusion fuels and thrives on us-versus-them thinking until the us-versus-them turns people against each other within the nation. Just like within our faith ancestors' tribes and religious groups. The strongman profits from loyalty and wealth by those who curry favor with bribes.

Since Eli's sons and then Samuel's sons were condemned for bribery how could the Israelites not suspect the same from a monarch? In a hierarchy without sound judgment and punishments, corruption becomes the norm.²

It must grieve God's heart to hear how quickly these Israelites failed to remember life under a monarch. They forgot how abdicating personal agency to someone else robs them of voice and very lives. They forgot all the generations who suffered under Pharaoh.

When the Israelites say they want to be like other nations means they no longer value God's claim on them, God's covenants with them, God's love for them. When they refuse God's laws, they deny themselves God's mercy.

² Timothy Snyder, "The Strongman Fantasy: And Dictatorship in Real Life," *Thinking About Substack*, March 17, 2024 <https://snyder.substack.com/p/the-strongman-fantasy>

This story paints a dark picture of human character – our inability to remember, imagine, and become when surrounded by divine power.

Just as readily as the first humans who enjoy the Garden of Eden decided that they knew better about what was good for them, only to be cast out, these Israelites living in the Promised Land refuse to heed God's warning.

Even when given the full scope of the consequences of our decisions, we stumble and fall towards the shiny object, seeking what seems an easy way out.

We discount the potential of our collective capacity and God's when we abdicate our responsibility.

But this is not the end, just like the first humans whom God placed into Eden.

When they chose to follow the devices and desires of their hearts, God goes with them. And God accompanies the Israelites after they place themselves under King Saul, with a god-like handsomeness.

For four hundred years the Israelites continue in the way of a monarch as they become enslaved to patronage and corruption, weakening their nation until, as predicted, they become exiled and enslaved.

Throughout it all, God remains faithful. God's prophets push them to imagine how life flourishes from justice and mercy. God upends our desires for the strongman by continually upending oppressive regimes through the underdogs, the marginalized, and ordinary humans, like you and me, who value freedom.

When all seems lost, God takes on our flesh in the man of Jesus to teach us how to treasure one another, tend one another, God fills the gaps in our imagination with grace to begin again. God still entrusts in you and the capacity, the gifts, and the freedom to choose to live in community with one another and in devotion to God, alone.



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