

Focus: Jesus gives himself out of love.

Writing to a friend in 1789, Ben Franklin penned the famous line, “In this world nothing can be certain except death and taxes.” At the time he was writing about the constitution which had just passed Congress. But he could just as well have been writing about our story from 1 Samuel today. This summer, we’ll be getting to know some of Israel’s kings: the good (like David), the bad (like Ahab), and the ugly (actually, I don’t know what any of them looked like). But the first decision was whether to have a king at all. Since they escaped their old bad king Pharaoh in Egypt and arrived in the Promised Land, the Israelites had never had a king. They relied on God.

But now a group wants God’s prophet Samuel to anoint a king for them. And Samuel is having none of it. As in any debate, he tries to persuade the people by telling them what the king will do. And it all boils down to one word he uses 5 times: **take**. “He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and his horsemen; he will take your male and female slaves”—and that’s not even counting the verses 12-15 our reading left out where he will take: commanders, implements of war, chariots, daughters, perfumers, cooks, bakers, the best of your fields, vineyards, orchards, grain, flocks.” It’s all quite a list! Welcome to the world of “**death and taxes**,” people! And finally, “you shall be [the king’s] slaves.” In other words, Samuel is telling the people: “Your ancestors just escaped slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, and now you’re going to willingly go into slavery to a king here. Don’t do it.”

But the people persist. And it’s their answer that is the most troubling to Samuel and to God: “No! But we are determined to have a king over us so that we can be like other nations.”

This is a rejection of their calling. The people of Israel were God’s chosen people, set apart, holy. The last thing God wants is for them to be *like other nations*. And what are the other nations doing? Fighting battles, taxing, oppressing. The question as Samuel and God see it is not just a political one: are you going to have a king, but instead it goes to the very soul of the nation of Israel. Who are you called to be? What does it mean to be chosen? How are you supposed to live?

As the church, three thousand years and an ocean away from Israel, our situation’s different. We choose our elected leaders, but we don’t get to choose whether we’ll have a king, or a president in our case. That’s a given. But those questions still speak to us.

As we’re reminded every April 15, our government takes a lot from us. Hopefully in return we get security, roads, bridges, healthcare, and a reasonable standard of living. But as Christians there are some things we can’t let our government or political leaders take from us.

Abraham Lincoln once quoted today’s Gospel reading and said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Let’s be honest: the house is pretty shaky in America right now. Both sides of the political divide are asking of us something more than votes or even taxes. They are asking for our loyalty, for our identity, for who we are, for our soul. When politics defines whether we get a vaccine, what sports or TV we watch, which news we consume, who we’re friends with, even as so sadly often happens *which church we go to*, it is **taking** from us. We’ve seen the disastrous consequences of this taking on a national level, but even in the divisions in many of

our own families. It's what happens when we give something or someone the ultimate importance or authority that belongs to God alone.

Unfortunately, it's become all too common whether in our country or in our neighborhoods, but as the church, like Israel before us: we are not called to be *just like everybody else*. We are called to put our trust in God and not in humans.

The truth is God has already given us a radically different way to live. In Jesus Christ, we see someone who took only our sin and death, and has given us life, forgiveness, love, resurrection, hope, and so much more.

Following Jesus doesn't mean opting out of society or government, and, yes, we still all have to pay our taxes. (Render unto Caesar and all that; sorry about that one.) Quite the opposite. After the people of Israel demanded a king, God did not give up on them, but eventually sent good kings like David, Hezekiah, Josiah, and finally the best king his Son Jesus. We don't control our times or our circumstances, but we do control how *we* choose to live and participate in this country we share. What would it look like for us to live like Jesus here and now: to follow his way of giving instead of taking?

Love, kindness, forgiveness, servanthood. These are not cliches. They are a way of undermining all the fear, hatred, and division we've been soaking in for years. Responding with love or kindness, forgiving a wrong, choosing to serve rather than playing the power game, these are like glitches that jam up the system. Jesus knew that. The Roman Empire had faced thousands of would-be-revolutionaries, but what finally toppled their culture on its head was a man who died on the cross forgiving his enemies.

The prophet Isaiah once called us to be "repairers of the breach." I like that. If the house is divided, maybe the role of Christians is to be the people who repair the foundation, who stabilize the house. To provide an alternative message, reality, lifestyle to what people are being offered. Because, with apologies to Ben Franklin, as Christians we believe that death and taxes come and go, but the words and ways of Jesus will stand forever. **Amen.**