

“What Is It We Want?”
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I grew up in Willmar, Minnesota. My parents were Republicans. Not just any old Republicans, but staunch, conservative Republicans. They loved Barry Goldwater. They were passionate about their politics. I can remember listening to the radio with them when I was only 6 years old. They were listening to the convention where President Eisenhower was nominated as the Republican candidate for the US. I was only six, but I knew my parents thought it was really exciting stuff. They must have been hoping that this brilliant commander would also be a wise and brilliant leader to lead them again in peacetime. Well you can imagine their shock when I came home from a Methodist college that all my relatives had gone to, and announced that I was now a Democrat. I know my father had serious doubts about his alma mater. When I turned 21, my mother and I went down to the local polling hall. I said to my Mother, “Well let’s go down and cancel out each others votes.” My mother got so mad, she didn’t speak to me again for the whole evening.

Nevertheless, what I mostly remember through the sixties and even into the seventies was lively dinnertime conversation about politics. We all got excited and raised our voices and had a very good time. It was all permissible to switch sides on a particular issue and I don’t remember anyone ever having any hard feelings. It was the late sixties and the seventies. It was a hopeful time. Everything seemed possible. It felt like we were on the cusp of creating something new. It felt like true social justice for all was possible. We really felt we were making progress toward civil rights and we really were going to make progress helping the poor get a better education and be financially comfortable in the world. We thought we could find leaders who would make a real difference in the world.

Today our scripture tells us the story of David’s anointing as the king of Israel. Yes, he had been anointed long ago as a boy by the prophet Samuel. This story doesn’t mention that earlier anointing. This anointing is by all the leaders of the twelve tribes, both north and south. The old prophet Samuel didn’t like kings. He had warned the tribes of Israel, what do you want a king for? You don’t need a king. Yahweh is your ruler. If you set a king over yourselves you’ll be sorry. He’ll levy taxes, he’ll draft your sons into the military. He’ll use you as conscript labor. He’ll take your wives and daughters into his harem. The sour old prophet Samuel was right. The kings of Israel did everything the prophet had warned of and more. Read the story in 1 and 2 Kings. The sad history of Israel tells us much. This is the history of kings. The people of Israel and Judah never stopped hoping for a different kind of king.

We can see that hope today in the text. It is the people who remind David, “The Lord said to you, it is you who shall be shepherd to my people Israel, you who shall be ruler of Israel.” Now in Hebrew the word *nagid* is not usually translated as ‘ruler’ it is translated as ‘prince.’ The people want a shepherd king. The shepherd king does not fleece the sheep and serve up their young on platters. The concept of a shepherd king is

very ancient it goes back to the Ugaritic and Canaanite literature before there ever was an Israel. The shepherd king seeks out the lost, brings back the stray, cares for the sick and strengthens the weak. The shepherd king binds up the weak and makes sure there is fresh water and good pastures for the whole flock. No matter what Samuel had warned about kings, the people continue to hope. They hope for something they cannot quite define or describe, but they understand the role of a shepherd. It is like that. They hope for one who will govern them like a shepherd and care for every last one of the flock. Our text today says the leaders of Israel made a covenant with David and agreement between the people and the prince. David is not to be an autocratic king. They call him a prince, a prince with a covenant. A covenant is where both parties adhere to a certain set of rules. The people are reminding David that he should be the prince that God intends him to be. Yahweh is king and David can only follow Yahweh's directions. David becomes king by consent of the people. David becomes king, but at first he doesn't really feel like a king.

What makes a king a king? If you'll read on in your bibles chapter 5 verses 10 and 11, the bible story tells us when David began to feel like a king. It was when others of the region began to honor him and pay homage to him; when his peers began to recognize him, then David felt like a king. King Hiram of Tyre sent messengers to David along with beautiful cedar wood and King Hiram had a palace of Cedar paneling built for David. "Then David began to perceive that the Lord had established him king over Israel." Aha! The prophet had named him king, the leaders and the people had named him king, but not until he felt that surge of power from the honor and adulation of other kings did David feel like a real king. Power, isn't that what makes a king a king? Then the storyteller goes on to tell us that finally David began to act like a real king.

David went with his army to capture the city of Jerusalem. David was clever. Jerusalem wasn't on any major trade routes. It wasn't a commercial center of any kind. But if David has his palace in Jerusalem, then he could keep his eye on both the tribes of the north and the tribes of the south. His enemies had been eliminated in the north for the time being, but David knew it would only be a matter of time until other rivals for the throne would challenge him. He wanted to be in a position to keep his military close to the northern and southern tribes. In Jerusalem, David took more women to be concubines and wives. He took women to be his uh. . . cooks and perfumers and bakers.... David acts like a real king. Real kings have enormous harems in cedar palaces. Cedar has always been a key word for kings. I remember my first church in Smith River. They had a fire and their little country church had burned down in 1968. They had rebuilt the church, and the lumber company had donated old-growth redwood paneling for the entire inside of the church walls and ceiling were of beautiful redwood. Every single time I stepped into the sanctuary I was stopped by that wonderful aroma. It stops you dead in your tracks. The aroma is divine. I imagine that fresh old-growth cedar has a similar kind of smell: heavenly fragrance that just defines the ultimate of luxury living. Kings live in palaces of cedar. The prophet of the Old Testament never stops complaining about kings who live in palaces with cedar paneling. It is a code word for a king that is closed in on himself and his own desires. No common folk are invited into the palace; they might leave a greasy handprint on the beautiful walls.

In this particular narrative we hear this morning, David arrives at a turning point in his life. What kind of king will he be? He stands poised between two different alternative visions of kingly rule. Will David be the shepherd of Israel? Will David be content to rule within the cedar paneled walls of his palace? What kind of King David will be remains to be seen. But for now, in this story David stands poised between the shepherd and the cedar. The storytellers' tale sets us to wondering, what kind of king will we have, what kind of government will we have? Because we live in a democracy, our wondering is also a challenge to us. Do we want for our nation a shepherd, or do we want the sweet seductions of cedar? Do we want one who will gather the lost and the blind and the weak, or shall we leave them alone and be ourselves satisfied with our personal trappings of power?

Somehow, looking back at the election of Eisenhower seems like a time of innocence. Somehow, the sixties and early seventies now seem like a time of naiveté. Those earlier years seem like a time when we could discuss what we wanted with each other with enthusiasm and hope. They seem like years when we could discuss politics without it becoming so polarized. Because we live in a democracy what we are able to discuss among our family and friends and community matters. It matters because continued talking and communication helps us all decide what it is we really want. If we know what kind of king we will have and if we know what kind of government we will have, we must first ask ourselves and each other what it is that we want, because that is certainly what we will get.