



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Second Sunday after Pentecost – June 6, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 Samuel 8:4-20; Mark 3:20-35

+I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Kings are a bad idea for the children of Israel. Samuel knows it. God knows it. Even the people who are asking for a king – the Israelites – know it, but they don't want to see it.

Having escaped Pharaoh and slavery, Israel had to figure out how to govern herself. The Lord raises up judges who rule over the people. That sort of works but it's also messy, complicated. It's alright if the Judge is alright – like Samuel – but when Samuel's sons whom he tries to make Judges are corrupt and are driven by greed and not God's law, it all kind of falls apart and then you get this situation where Israel says "Enough! we want the kind of system everyone else has." It's clear they don't want to live according to God's law - which is kind of the perennial problem with the children of Israel.

And even after telling them what putting a king in place of God will be like: that he's going to take their money, he's going to take their wives and their sons and daughters to serve his own interests, he's going to take their land, even then, for some inexplicable reason the Israelites think they know best and they want to construct their own system and they go: 'we don't care, we still want a king like other nations.' And in doing that, they reject God and they reject the fact that God has made them a chosen people – set apart – to live justly. As Scott Hoezee, a first Testament scholar says, "those kings, of course, help lead Israel's downhill charge toward ungodliness that ends up in her near-obliteration."

All is not lost though, because, the Lord graciously used even Israel's deeply flawed and disobedient desire for a monarch to work out the Lord's own will. After all, who turns out to be not just Israel, but also the whole world's King? Jesus Christ ... a great, great, great grandson of one of Israel's kings, David.

But there's a lot of trouble – a lot of adversity - to flow under that bridge before Jesus arrives. And a lot of disastrous choices too. We do tend to make our own adversity.

So, we can see from Israel's experience in 1st Samuel, that we have a propensity for disastrous choices, even when we know God's will for us is different – and far superior - from our will for us. And we also know – because we know the history of the children of Israel – that those choices could still be corrected in time because God offered us the choice of redemption and forgiveness through his son and our Saviour, Jesus.

Hold those thoughts for a few minutes.

Because it seems that where Jesus is, in his relationship with his people is connected. In this third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus seems to be calling the people, the religious authorities, on a bunch of behaviours, beliefs and actions that are driving people away from God's law and God's will.

And they sure don't like it. In fact, they hate it and will try to do anything not to hear God's voice, and not to live in God's ways. And they'll try to discredit Jesus – even his family tries to silence him – and the truth.

The religious authorities haven't seen anyone rigorously live God's law in this way – well, probably ever. So they accuse Jesus of being 'out of his mind' – actually it's his family who do that! Then they accuse him of being in league with the devil.

Jesus deals with that accusation by asking why Satan would help him destroy Satan? – get a grip, that's not even logical. But he's also angered by the suggestion that what is being done by and through God's Spirit is being named by them as sin. And that he cannot support. That is an unforgivable suggestion.

And he is forced to turn his face to God and away from family, and convention, and the narratives of the authorities that preserved the status quo rather than lift up God's law of love.

It's not an easy reading this morning. As another New Testament scholar Alyce McKenzie put it, this passage doesn't boil down to a simple moral, but it does contain a strong command to give God the glory when we see demons exorcized and evil thwarted. It contains a strong command to get out of the way of Jesus' outrageous and gracious power. Those who impede God's attempts to heal our world are the ones who are out of their (our) minds. Those who stand in the way of God's attempts to redeem relationships are the one with unclean spirits.

I have been thinking about her words for a few days.

A few days in a week in which we've come face to face with our demons as a country -- and as a church. The news of the remains of 215 precious children buried in the grounds of a residential school in Kamloops, 215 little souls whom we failed, was like a bomb going off for our whole nation. That's shameful in itself as this is anti-news really - as we have known but chosen to ignore the absolute tragedy of the deaths of thousands of Indigenous children in the residential schools around our country. We have publicly known that this was the case since 2016 – and tragically, God help us, we can expect more revelations of this kind in the years to come.

It's amazing to me the strength of that willful blindness. Only in some dystopian nightmare could we think for a hot minute that erasing a people's culture, language, spirituality through oppressing and dehumanizing small children – and making that the policy of the land through government, and through churches colluding with the state for power and hegemony was in any way acceptable. Like kings for Israel, it was a disastrous decision. But that's the thing about human-made systems and narratives of power. They rarely reflect the heart of God. But we choose them anyway,...

It seems that we, like the children of Israel are pretty adept at making disastrous choices and creating our own adversity. It seems that we, like the religious authorities who opposed Jesus, are even more adept at creating and willfully keeping in place narratives that utterly, completely ignore God's law of love – all the while claiming that we're fulfilling it.

It's uncomfortable when we realize these stories in scripture are about us, isn't it? When through scripture, our supremacy narratives are confronted; when the veil of secrecy and guilt is pulled back and our dysfunction and wrongheadedness is revealed in the light of God's law – and I use that language purposefully – as believers this is not optional – of love, we are made uncomfortable – even angry - like the “scribes who came down from Jerusalem” to protect and preserve their power and privilege.

Well, that's what the word of God does. It convicts. It reveals the truth. It corrects.

And if that makes us mad, like the crowds and the religious authorities, we need to examine ourselves; to check our thoughts and our actions.

If that makes us mad, we need to face up to that anger and conquer it in the name of Jesus Christ because nothing less will do.

You see, if we believe in a God who has a mission of love in this world and that the point of Jesus coming to us was to show us what God's love is like and how it can transform us and this world we live in – and we do -

– and if we believe that God is always ahead of us and always bidding us to come and join the energy and action – to come and join the healing and making restitution for the disordered things we do when we forget that God is sovereign over us and over every part of this world God loves so much, and we do

-and if we believe that we are ever and always on a journey to become more and more like Christ – and this is the true meaning of being a progressive Christian by the way – then, and this is the crux of the matter, it seems to me that there are some things that need to happen, and happen now.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do now is to listen. Listen first to Archbishop Mark MacDonald's words as he represents many Indigenous communities when he says:

“The Western Institutions including the churches, always tried to convince Indigenous peoples that they the West owned the truth, that it was their unique possession, and that only by becoming exactly like them could Indigenous People be saved. Now we may say it clearly and for all time: this lie is dead, even for the institutions that believed and proclaimed it. Today we seek healing and truth, Indigenous and non-Indigenous from God, who offers Forgiveness, Justice and Truth in the Gospel, saying that it was for this, exactly for this, that Jesus was anointed.”

--Archbishop Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop

“We have wronged the Indigenous peoples of this land. That needs to stop now. And we need to start by adopting a posture of humility and listening. Listen to the stories of those who have been through horrors that we can hardly contemplate. We need to become those with ears to hear.

What's worse, we've tried to cover up the wrong we have done - or we've been willfully blind to the hurt. That has to stop. Now. Then we need to intentionally educate ourselves about the systems, the narratives of supremacy that are still very much alive in our culture, in our homes, on our streets today. We have to see them, name them, and reject them, in Jesus' name.

And in Jesus' name, and with humility, we need to ask permission to forge a new relationship with Indigenous communities in our land and in our church – one that has listening and respect as its keynotes.

This is not natural or easy work. The biblical record tells us that. We are a stiff-necked people and once we're set on putting someone or something other than God as sovereign in our lives – there's really no stopping us. Our history as a nation and as a church bears this truth out.

But confession, penance and at some point, a long way down the road, when it is possible, forgiveness, are core Christian spiritual disciplines. We must not rush through any of these things.

These are not mere gestures, these things constitute the path to a new relationship. But only if we are courageous in listening to truth, and intentional in contrition, and most of all: steadfast in remaining in the awkwardness of working toward a future redeemed only by the mercy and justice of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

It's a long road folks, but the lie of supremacy is now dead, and we must walk a different road together.

But most of all – today - we pray for the repose of the souls of the 215 precious children of Kamloops and of the many as yet undiscovered children of every other residential school – precious in their parents' sight, precious in God's sight. We pray for the ears to hear and for a contrite spirit. We pray for the blessing of anger and for the will to do better. We pray that God is sovereign in our lives and that God's law of love directs and guides us along a new path - the good road.

I speak to you in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.