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## **Kings and Prophets**

Sermon, Pentecost 4, Proper 7-C, June 20, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

*1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39*

Today's Old Testament reading continues the conflict between Elijah and King Ahab of Israel and his wife Jezebel. Last Sunday Ahab was trying to take Naboth's vineyard for himself. Today Elijah is fleeing the wrath of Jezebel.

The Old Testament is full of wonderful stories like this, and one of the advantages of the Revised Common Lectionary (frequently referred to as the RCL) is that for the Sundays after Pentecost, these stories are arranged in a sequential manner. The Old Testament readings in the Episcopal lectionary found in the back of the Prayer Book are arranged to be in harmony with the Gospel for the day. These are still available in the RCL Track Two. But Track 1, which we began using last year, provides a semi-continuous reading of the Old Testament. In year A the readings are from Genesis through Judges; in Year B we read selections about the first kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, and some of the Wisdom literature, like Proverbs and Job; and in Year C, this year, we read the prophets. So the remainder of this Church Year, up to the First Sunday in Advent, we will be hearing stories about the prophets and the kings of Judah and Israel.

The books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings form what is referred to as the deuteronomistic history. These books are *not* neutral historical reconstructions such as we might find in a modern news account. They define a pattern of conduct, of moral and social behavior that is based on the covenant between the Lord and His people, and were written sometime during or after the Exile. They take the prophetic perspective and are negative to kingship. These narratives lack close correlation with what we know of the factual history of the region, but are significant in the formation of our Christian tradition. They describe tumultuous times spanning most of a millennium so I will sketch out the historical context for you.

There was the Exodus from Egypt (remember Moses?) described in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. The Books of Joshua and Judges describe the conquest and resettling of Israel; but the stories of the great battles are not supported by archeological evidence. Modern scholarship postulates a more gradual assimilation of the 12 tribes into the existing Canaanite society. (Canaanite can refer to one tribe or collectively to all the tribes of indigenous people found in the area west of the Jordan.) The Canaanites worshiped many different gods and some of the rites involved hedonistic practices and even child sacrifice. The Israelites worshipped one God, the Lord, YHWH, and lived by a stricter moral code based on the Ten Commandments; so there was ongoing tension between the two traditions.

Israel was governed by a series of judges, but in time the people requested a king. The prophet Samuel told them they didn't really want a king. Samuel said, "He will take your sons and appoint them to be his horsemen. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work." But the people refused to listen to Samuel; they said, "We are determined

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to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”<sup>1</sup>

So Samuel anointed Saul King of Israel; and there began a relationship between the king and the prophet. Samuel was the prophet for Saul, and Nathan for King David. Solomon had no prophet. He was accommodating to the ways of the Canaanites, maybe in part because he didn't have a prophet constantly reminding him of the covenant with the Lord. After his death in 922 BCE, Jeroboam rebelled and formed a separate kingdom, called Israel, with a capital at Samaria. The faithful remnant remained in Jerusalem, the City of David, forming the kingdom of Judah under King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. The subsequent kings tended to live up to the most dire predictions of Samuel. They were mostly greedy and rapacious, and consorted with the Canaanites; while a series of prophets tried to get the kings and the people to be faithful to the Lord.

Two hundred years after this division, the northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrians; then the Assyrians fell to the Babylonians, who conquered the remaining kingdom of Judah 137 years after the fall of Israel. The captured Israelites were exiled in Babylon for about 50 years. When the Persians captured the Babylonians, Cyrus, the King of Persia, allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland.

I have provided you with a handout that is in your bulletin. These are timelines that come from a textbook I used in seminary.<sup>2</sup> The first two give the broad sweep of the Books of Samuel and Kings. The other timelines situate the various prophets in historical context. There is a list of the Old Testament readings for the rest of the church year; and the last page is a chronological listing of the kings, the prophets, and the kings of Mesopotamia. You may want to keep this for reference as we listen to these readings this summer and fall.<sup>3</sup>

This is the day on which we honor our high school graduates. As you move out of school into the beginning of your lives as young adults, you will encounter many of the same questions that people face in these stories. Will you stand up for what you believe, or succumb to peer pressure and follow the crowd? Will you take responsibility for your decisions and actions, or will you look for someone else to blame? You are who you have become in the formative experience of family and school. Now it is up to you to build on that experience. Who are you becoming? Making your decisions and taking that responsibility is an important part of growing into maturity. As you move forward to college or career remember that Jesus loves you; and all of us here love you and wish you well.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 8:10-22

<sup>2</sup> Bandstra, Barry L., *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Wadsworth Pub. 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The handout is on the Grace Church website under Worship: Selected Homilies: Kings and Prophets Timelines.pdf

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21