

PENTECOST 3B 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
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In case you haven't noticed, we're in a year filled with elections. Mexico was in the news last weekend, India this past week, and England is just around the corner. And within our own borders, the, shall we say, "aroma" of electoral possibility fills the air. And there seems to be enough warming of that air to alter anyone's climate.

One of the perks of studying Holy Scripture is the discovery that what might feel new to us isn't really all that new after all. Ever since Moses left a bunch of former slaves on the east bank of the Jordan River, humans have looked for leaders who seem just like them to get a sense of direction. Joshua filled that role for awhile. Then there were judges, and some of the better of those were female. Then some early prophets came along.

But the prophetic nature isn't something passed along by genetic disposition. Samuel did well on his own, but his sons don't follow in his footsteps. So the descendants of those led by Moses look around at what other people have, and decide they want a king. Samuel isn't happy about that, but God says it's okay. They're not really against Samuel. Their real disagreement is with God. But, God gives Samuel permission to tell them they should really be careful what they ask for. They just might get it.

As kings go, it's still up to a prophet to anoint the one who will occupy the throne. That remains true today. Queens, kings and emperors or empresses are anointed by the highest religious authority in the land. It's more of a way of being able to claim divine intervention or selection, mind you, but as our Gospel lesson reminds us, questioning whether that's true might get us into more trouble. Despite the proclivities of many who claim to speak for God, God seldom uses a PA system to blast current news so that everyone can hear.

Samuel tells those who have depended on his word for years just what will happen when they have a king. You'd think that his history of honest prophetic speech would carry some weight, but they're afraid of what life might become without Samuel, so they start rejecting his words while he's still standing there.

So Saul is anointed King of Israel. Things go fairly well for awhile, but then Saul becomes paranoid and starts raving, seeing enemies all around. Thank God there are no tapes. I'll leave the result of all this until next week, when we hear about Samuel's next steps after God changes God's mind and regrets naming Saul as king. And, yes, God changes God's mind. Ponder that one for a week.

All decisions have consequences. One dramatic consequence appeared during the reign of Israel's first king, and continued as long as they had kings. Rivals came

forward, even sibling rivalry, often taking lethal forms. Saul's paranoia led to his downfall, and David's anointing as King. David's son, Solomon, succeeded him, but not after another son made his own claim to the throne as David lay on his deathbed. After Solomon, two of his sons set up rival kingdoms known as Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom.

So when Jesus tells his accusers "a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand," all they have to do is remember their own history to find the truth in that statement. Most political entities since the time of Jesus won't have to look too far, either. And that includes our own, which I sometimes wonder if it will continue to exist longer than I will.

We are quick to identify ourselves in negative terms. We explain who we are by declaring that we're not the other. We separate ourselves from our siblings in the faith by pointing out that we do things differently. We're traditional. We're conservative. We're liberal, or progressive. We're Rite One or Rite Two, or Anglican instead of Episcopalian. Orthodox or not. Seldom do I hear the word Christian, and it left at that. With all those other labels, and I'm speaking only about our denomination, Christian may be the most difficult to claim because our words contort themselves to avoid the chief indicator Jesus used to declare who we are, and are to be known.

This is nothing new. Paul faced the same divisions in the church he himself planted in Corinth. It's the old "where two or three are gathered there will be four opinions" stuff we laugh about, but is a painful truth too often present.

So I'll ask a question I often use to reorient a discussion. Where is God in the choices we make? Given what God said to Samuel about Israel wanting a king, the answer is likely on the sidelines, like a father watching his children play their games, hoping they all survive this part of it without severe injury.

Ultimately we all too often see God exactly where the whole world can see God, according to scripture. Crucified, hanging on a tree, while most everyone else goes on about their business. And yet that same God comes to us, desires to be with us, to help us choose God instead of the gods we create for ourselves: to choose life by offering life to others, to heal pain and division by admitting and openly showing our own scars, to offer bread and wine to a hungry, thirsty world.

That is where we find ourselves united—with each other in and across denominational and institutional differences, with the grace to admit that all differences do not require the death of a relationship—united by the Spirit that gives life to all of us and that unites us with God.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. Admit that truth and our places in it. Then, let's show the world what a kingdom united with itself, with others, and with God, can be.