

1 Samuel 7:3-12
Healing Worship
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
5-1-16

This morning, we're continuing a series of summer messages looking at the life of David. But we haven't even gotten to David yet. Don't worry, he's coming. Like any great story, we need a backdrop or a canvas on which to hang these stories. Last week, we looked at the heroic faith, the trust that defied the odds, of Hannah. And we will see that this, too, is a quality that characterizes David's earthy faith.

This morning, we're going to look at another man who precedes the great King of Israel: Hannah's son Samuel. Given back to God in service to the temple, it says in chapter 3 that Samuel was with the Lord, and the Lord was with Samuel—so much so that, it says, none of his words fell to the ground. Samuel led Israel as its final Judge. And even though Samuel's leadership was wise and godly, Israel was surrounded by competing loyalties.

The great temptation Israel faced was the temptation to hedge their bets. Certainly this Yahweh thing is compelling, but just in case it falls through, the people of Israel also considered Baal and Astartes.

Sometimes it is downright challenging to live by faith. When our future is built upon a promise, as Israel's was, you can imagine how tempting it would be to help God along a bit by casting a wider net. That's what Israel did, they hedged their bets. It was Yahweh plus...

When I was heading into ministry, I realized that vast sums of money and material wealth were likely not in my future. So when I was 22, I had a friend who was beginning his career as a financial planner. He encouraged me to open a Roth IRA, which I did. So each month, I put a little bit of money away in a retirement account, which I thought was the responsible thing to do.

I was hedging my bets. I was trusting God, mostly. But I was also planning for myself, in case God's plan for my future didn't line up with what I'd envisioned.

The last few months have posed challenges that were greater than our ability to plan. That security blanket I'd worked hard to create is flying out the window. And I remember very vividly a moment recently I believe was God speaking to me. "Are you going to trust in me or will it be me plus your IRA? If it's you and me, then let it be you and me."

When Yahweh returned the Ark to the Israelites, Samuel stood up before his countrymen and women and said, **"If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."**

Samuel's call to "put away" the foreign gods and goddesses is a call to come clean from the predominate culture around him. Baal and Astarte were the dominant deities of the culture. They were the local Canaanite fertility gods. When the people engaged in Baal worship, they were simply attempting to bribe or entice the local deities to give them what they wanted. If we're honest, much

of what we see in modern North American religion is simply us attempting to prime the pump to get something from God.

Samuel was not just telling Israel to clean up their act and stop looking to others for meaning. Samuel was calling them to something much deeper, something theological, something spiritual. Samuel was calling them/us to repent of the sin of hedging our bets. God plus us.

Our culture tells us that trusting in God is nice and all, but eventually we need to do our part. We can't expect to count on God for everything, so we'd better embrace the cultural mandate of self-determination. At the end of the day, I'm the only one I count on, I steer the ship.

But what happens when doing our part doesn't match up? What happens when everything we save doesn't cover it? What happens when the career we thought would bring us such satisfaction and security leaves us empty and hollow inside? What happens when we go through that experience that we just never could have anticipated?

The Israelites had lost their greatest possession. The Ark was their physical connection to Yahweh, and now, without it, they were alone and vulnerable. And it says in chapter 5 that when Yahweh and Dagon were placed side by side, each and every day the idol to Dagon fell face down before the Ark. Now it was being returned to them with the charge: put away your false gods and worship me alone.

They are given an opportunity right away to put that charge to the test. Samuel gathers Israel at Mizpah. Mizpah was set atop the central ridge in Palestine just a few miles north of Jerusalem. Mizpah means "watchtower." And it's there that they gathered and poured out water before the Lord as they fasted and prayed and confessed their sins.

The People of Israel are having one of those transformative experiences of worship and prayer. They are being drawn back to God and being reforged as a community in God's image. And right away they have the chance to test that repentance; their trust in God is immediately put to the test.

The Philistines see that Israel has their heads bowed and eyes closed in prayer and they come running to do what they do best—fight. The question for Israel: Is their belief just surface piety that will crumble under the Philistine pressure and send them scurrying after the tangible gods they've trafficked with for so long? Or will they use this as an opportunity to flex their faith muscles?

Remarkably, they call on Samuel to pray for them. Samuel prays and leads them in worship. And God answers the prayers and the Philistines are defeated. Even though Israel does have a part to play in this story, it's not what you would imagine—it's also a little uncharacteristic. Israel wasn't called to the action of battle, but the action of prayer.

God accomplished the victory, but as the story unfolds before us, our understanding of the world around us begins to shift: we begin with God and everything else flows from that. In this story, the invisible is more real than the visible. Don't be so quick to trust what you can see, because God is always at work going to battle for those who trust in him.

As a church, do you know what one of the most important things we can do together is? Worship. Recently a Pew research study indicated that in America today, regular church attendance is defined as two Sundays a month. Now, I say this not as a passive aggressive attempt to increase church

attendance, but as a bold statement of true reality. When we gather to worship the living and resurrected God, when we storm the gates of Hell with the words of Scripture on our lips and hymns of faith in our lungs, God transforms our lives.

Worship is not just our adoration of God, but it is God's provision and protection of us. When we gather to sing and pray, and listen to Scripture and share our lives with one another, we are engaging in the spiritual discipline of building up the body of Christ, and when the body is strong and well-conditioned, we all benefit. This is why worship is not just a private experience, because the hands, the feet, the arms and legs don't operate independently of one another, but are united in function and purpose under their head—Jesus Christ. This is why making time each week for worship is so critical. When one part of the body is missing, the body is incomplete. And when we, as a whole, bring our lives, our concerns, our hopes together into this one place, the invisible, indescribable, inescapable presence of the living God surrounds us and goes to battle for us.

We all face the obstacles of life, and every one of us is tempted to rely on the gods of the air, and the gods of our culture like self-reliance, self-determination, self-improvement. But like the Israelites at Mizpah—who gathered in the sight of their enemies to the West (Philistines) and their enemies to the East (Amorites)—we gather together in plain view of the struggles and temptations that besiege us on every side and we bow our heads in prayer. ***And like the Israelites, our worship is guarded by the living God, the risen Savior Jesus Christ—it even throws the enemies around us into confusion.***

Finally, do you see what Samuel does when the Philistines are defeated? Samuel takes a stone and sets it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and calls it Ebenezer—"stone of help." Because living a life of faith is never merely a matter of the individual soul, nor is it just doing the right thing in the right circumstance. The insides and outsides of our lives are always in motion and affecting one another. And when Israel's inside and outside met, Samuel called for recognition. Ebenezer is one of those moments.

Throughout the Old Testament, men and women would set stones upon one another as a monument to the moments when God showed himself faithful. As we live our lives outside this place, beset by all sorts of challenges and obstacles, we have the chance to return week in and week out to worship and be surrounded by the presence of God, who goes before and who helps us in our time of need. And as we go, may this stone memorial be remembered in this community as an Ebenezer to a people who know and believe that "Thus far the Lord has helped us."