

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Living the Dream

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Holy Scripture opens with the poetry of God breathing all that is into existence, including each of us.

Hear these words from Genesis:

“God said, ‘Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of...all the earth.’

God created humanity in God’s own image,
in the divine image God created them...” (Gen 1:26-27)

Each of us embody some spark of God’s divine image, and only through the breadth of humanity can we to begin to comprehend God’s will.

Fast forward from the grand design of creation, through the Garden of Eden, family drama as staged in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, to enslavement in Egypt.

God intervenes throughout when they get in trouble.

While wandering in the desert, God gives them the ten best ways – the ten commandments – to establish order. Despite continual bickering, God places them, as promised, in the land of milk and honey so the tribes of Israel may thrive.

The Book of Judges describes this time, after Moses and Joshua.

Through the care of a judge, an individual with a combined role of prophet, priest, and city manager, a judge assumes this simple position and then hands the responsibility to another.

Each person rises when needed to serve as God gifts and calls. Each person loves God first and all of God's people. God's majesty is revealed in a government for the people, by the people.

It did not do so well. In short order, it became a time of chaos and anarchy.

These judges fail to live up to the modest expectations. The people began to fight within tribes. They fought between tribes. This history book closes with just how far they fell; "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." (Judges 21:25)

No wonder God gets ticked off at humanity, again.

The book of 1 Samuel describes a priest by the name of Samuel who serves as the super priest and prophet, but not the king. When he ages, something needs to happen.

Our lesson today, rarely read in worship, consists of conversations between the people and Samuel, and Samuel and God.

Before we hear this, please pray with me,

Dear God,

As you spirit hovered over the waters of creation, breathing life into existence, breathe your spirit into these ancient words. Startle us with the truth you spoke centuries ago. May we hear your wisdom. Give us courage. Give us compassion. Give us the chance to become the dream you imagined. Amen.

1 Samuel 8, selected verses from 1 through 20

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ³Yet his sons did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. ⁴Then all the elders of Israel came to Samuel ⁵and said to him, “appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”

⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰ So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots...

¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you on that day.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰ 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.”

On this Independence Day weekend, when we celebrate things like baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet, what could be more American than baseball?

As an aside, last year General Motors dusted off that catchy, fifty-year-old tune and remade it with chef Guy Fieri.

“Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet” will live on as an ear worm for a new generation.

Every small town, every neighborhood park and school yard, no matter how grand or rustic, has a baseball diamond. Families hand down gloves until they are beyond repair and then tuck them away for sentimental value.

Even movies about baseball endure. *Field of Dreams* – celebrating my beloved Iowa. *Bull Durham*, another classic.

Perhaps one of the most iconic scenes comes from *A League of Their Own* with Tom Hanks and Geena Davis, released 30 years ago this weekend.

Based upon a true story, during WWII, with men at war, the national pastime of baseball continues with teams of women competing. Fiercely. Fans develop. The players mature. Teams strengthen. Rivalries form.

After months on the road of practice and play, Davis’s character, Dottie, packs her bags, only instead of getting on the team bus, she walks to her car. Just before the World Series, she decides to quit because her husband has come home from the war. More than the most valuable player on the team, Dottie is recognized as the best player in the league.

The tension between Dotti and Jimmy, the team manager played by Hanks, takes your breath away. Jimmy

acknowledges she has her dreams, a whole life ahead to make hundreds of babies, but right now, she cannot walk away. He challenges her:

Baseball is what gets inside you.
It's what lights you up.

She doesn't deny it. This star player says, "it just got too hard."

Jimmy knows this truth, and responds,
It's supposed to be hard.
If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it.
The hard is what makes it great.

It's worth watching the whole old movie just for that passionate truth.

You might remember Hank's saying "There's no crying in baseball." ¹

But this line is the enduring truth:
It's supposed to be hard.
If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it.
The hard is what makes it great.

Whether it's graduating, raising kids, or paying off the mortgage, the satisfaction we get from a task is often

¹ The media releases, celebrating the thirty-year anniversary of the movie's release sparked my memory of "there's no crying in baseball" and lead to the rest of these timeless truths.

proportional to the difficulty. And what we accomplish inspires each of us to do more. When we pursue hard things, others join with us, to accomplish through diverse talents what we cannot do on our own.

This weekend we celebrate, along with baseball and all the picnics and fireworks, the persistence of the people in our nation to do hard things.

In this melting pot of America, from fighting on foreign soils to protect the freedoms of others, to the technological prowess we foster, we do hard things because of something inside of us. We share it. It lights us up. What gets inside us and lights us up is the dream that our creator endowed each of us with inalienable rights.

This country honors freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And the freedom to pursue each of these in his or her own vision so long as it does not infringe upon another. For those of us who identify as Christian, this divine spark comes from God to be God's image in the world. To be something bigger than ourselves and give something to the future. The divine spark is what keeps us from throwing in the towel.

Our story from the Hebrew scriptures recalls a time when God's people did throw in the towel. After two hundred years, from the time of entering the promised land until the

bickering became so toxic that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

Rather than try to reclaim what God desires, in foolishness, they decided it was just too hard. They asked for a king. Other nations had one. Kings adorned in grandeur. Kings with charisma. Who purportedly would go before them in battle. Who cared about their welfare.

Surprisingly, God relents. In the conversation between Samuel and God, we can wonder, did God speak in anger, “give them a king.” Or is God a weary parent who finally gives in to a persistent toddler?

God tells Samuel, in effect, they have been forsaking me for other gods. That’s what this amounts to—replacing me with a flashy human king who will function like a god in their lives, small enough to control, or so they thought. God tells Samuel to give in and to warn the people of the consequences. God sends a clear message: this king will send you in front during battle. Take one tenth of everything. And demand your complete devotion. The king will take it all, including your very life, and give you nothing in return.

The rest of scripture details the rise and fall of the corrupt and self-serving kings. If the people thought living as judges was hard, life with a king became deadly. Later, the monarchy fell, and the people became subject to a foreign tyrant, again.

This time, God intervenes with God's own self. Jesus calls us to see God's divine image in the other, the prisoner, the hungry, the stranger. Jesus ignites the spark of the divine in each of us, so we can see it in others and see them as not the "other" but as God's beloved. This time, through Jesus, God calls us to live as God's people regardless of the political leader. Jesus comes to us because this is hard, to remind us that we can do what God dreams.

Today, we celebrate the day our nation rejected the British monarchy and the way it denied us agency over ourselves. Today, we honor the patriots who risked their lives in crafting revolutionary ideals and those that gave their lives in the battle for liberty so that we, the people, possess the freedom to decide how best to care for one another.

Democracy. Yes, it is messy. Fraught with unreasonable demands. Bickering of what's fair. It demands compromise. Corruption preys upon the system. Human egos manipulate the truth. After 246 years, we seem to be at an inflection point. Will we do the hard things to restore trust? Will we recommit to the work of governing within the laws? Hold people accountable - on all sides. Uphold integrity and honor. Succumb to the passions to let party leaders become our kings?

God has grander ideas for us. The majesty of God rises from inside of us. The grace of Jesus carries us through the hard times to love and risk and forgive. And to stand firm.

God's dream always lives on, the question before us is how we will bear it into the future.



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