

# Try Again, Samuel

June 16, 2024

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Mark 4:26-34

The first government of the Israelites after the Exodus was a pretty loose one. If there was a primary organizational concept, it was the tribe: Judah, Benjamin, Reuben, Gad, Dan, and so on. The primary leadership was the elder, or a council of elders. The nation as a whole didn't really have a government, but someone would be acknowledged as a judge. The judge settled disputes, but also organized the nation's resources in times of crisis, whether it be due to crop failures and famine or international conflict and war.

Samuel was the last of the judges. Judges weren't just appointed; they came to the work through the call of God. The Scriptures suggest that there were periods when God simply didn't summon up a judge. That may have contributed to the people's feeling that this system wasn't working. If you couldn't be confident of a judge when you needed one, then you needed a monarch. One thing about kings: they're always around.

God, by the way, didn't think it was a great idea. God thought that a king would impose a lot of burdens on the people that a judge wouldn't. As it happens, God was right. Most of the things God predicted came true under the first king, Saul, and continued to be true all through the period of the kingdoms. But as our text began this morning, Saul had exhausted God's patience with a series of blunders. "And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel."

Incidentally, that's only the second time the Scriptures record that God was sorry about anything. The first time was when God was sorry about making human beings, and that led to the flood. As for the third time... there was no third time.

God was *really* unhappy about Saul. God decided to make a change.

Klaus Peter-Adam writes at Working Preacher, "... Yahweh's 'regret' over Saul is best juxtaposed to God's promise that as long as the earth endures (see Genesis 8:21-22), he would never again 'regret' as once before, when God erased all humans because they 'grieved him to his heart' (see Genesis 6:6-7). God's regret specifically over Saul's kingdom is thus embedded into God's overarching whole-hearted affirmation to all of humankind."

So God determined to try again. Or somewhat more accurately: Try again, Samuel.

Samuel had to try again seven more times. One son after another passed before the judge, and one son after another passed on. God assured Samuel that there were things in the heart that

God could see, and that Samuel couldn't, and that made the difference in who would be a suitable king. Eventually, Jesse ran out of sons, or so it appeared. "Are all your sons here?" Samuel asked.

Well, there was one left. You know who it was. It was David. "Rise and anoint him," said God, "for this is the one."

If this were a folktale, this would be a great ending. The youngest and least regarded had attained his realm and his true love (OK, that's not in the story) and so he should live happily ever after. Those youngest sons – occasionally youngest daughters – so often become the heroes in folktales that, when I read one, I tend to predict who's going to fail and who's going to succeed, and I'm usually right. When the youngest one gets into the story, that's the one.

But this wasn't a folktale, though the writing may have been influenced by similar stories. Anointing David king wasn't the end of the story, it was the beginning. David did not immediately wear the crown. Initially, he joined the household of King Saul and showed no signs of trying to replace him. The two ended up leading opposing armies in an armed rebellion where neither quite dared to enter a pitched battle. If they had, hostile neighboring nations might have taken advantage, and indeed they tried. This went on for years.

Even after Saul's death in battle with a Philistine army, it took more years for David's authority to be acknowledged by all the tribes of Israel. A lot of questions, a lot of decisions, a lot of choices had to be made before David reigned. They go back to: Try again, Samuel.

"If at first you don't succeed: Try, try again." You know that one, I'm sure. It's somewhat countered by a more recent formula: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," written by Rita Mae Brown.

It's not just barrel-rolling 'apapane who do things like that. Businesses flounder when they continue to make the same products and fail to adapt to changing needs or tastes. Pullman made railroad cars for decades, nearly monopolizing the business, but didn't move into new products as passenger traffic moved to aircraft. How many children have learned, to their shock, that the cute thing they did as a preschooler isn't cute any longer in elementary school? How many governments have faced growing unrest for maintaining oppressive systems when the time to break them is long past?

If at first you don't succeed, try something different.

There are parts of our lives that seem to contradict that piece of wisdom. Our experience is full of skills that take repetition to develop. Wood and metalworking. Knitting and crocheting. Quilting and embroidery. Singing and playing instruments. Athletics and driving. We repeat those things, we practice those things, we do those things over and over and we get better, so try, try again, right, Pastor?

Yes... and no.

When building skills like that, we're not just learning what works. We're learning what doesn't work. What's the proper position of fingers on the needles? That one? No. That one? No. That one? Well, that's better.

If I'm preparing a vault as a gymnast, I'm going to get better as my muscles get more toned, but more than that, I'm going to get better because I adjust for things that slow me down or put me in the wrong place at the right time. As a musician, I know that the point of practice is, in part, changing the poor finger placement and finding a better one.

Practice, musicians say, makes permanent, not perfect. Good practice is when you change things until you find the techniques that will make permanent good.

Try again, Samuel. Try something different.

Indeed, that's what he did. He stepped outside the expectations of the day that said a king would be succeeded by his son. He went to find someone else. Folktales might favor the youngest, but most cultures, including that of ancient Israel, favored the oldest son. Samuel tried something different when he anointed David. Anointing a new monarch or acclaiming a new leader (in contemporary terms) frequently kicks off an armed rebellion. Samuel tried something different there, too, so different that David served the king he was anointed to replace quite faithfully for several years.

Try again, Samuel. Try something different.

The last few years of pandemic have forced Church of the Holy Cross to a number of somethings different. Though most of our meetings take place face to face once again, and I'm profoundly glad that health conditions allow it, there are a few meetings that remain on Zoom because, it turns out, it's pretty darned convenient to do that and they don't demand the ongoing focused attention of an in-person meeting. We revised our communications so that we could remind people regularly that we are their church, that we care about you.

The most obvious, of course, is that we have cameras in our sanctuary each Sunday with a live stream and a recording on the Internet. We could stop. But we've found that we have more worshipers when we combine both here and home than if we did only one or the other. We've found that someone home with a brief illness can still worship, if not the way they'd prefer. We've found that someone with Sunday morning commitments can worship later in the week. We've found that someone with serious mobility limitations can still worship on Sunday or when works for them.

What adaptations are next? We made these quickly in response to the challenges of the day, and we've found that some of them continue to serve us. So to be honest, I'm taking a few deep breaths before looking at new things. It's a gift to have time to consider things.

What I'm sure of is that God continues to guide us toward better options, better choices, better relationships. I'm sure that some things we try won't work – if you check out the videos of our first few Sundays, you'll find that we didn't figure out how to make that work immediately. That's OK. We learned, and we will learn.

Try again, Samuel.

Let's make things better.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*