

God's Story: Co-writers

1 Samuel 8:1-22

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Usually when we think of the greatest stories ever told, they're the work of one brilliant mind, someone who is inspired to create an entire fictional universe and then share it with the world around them – a solitary genius, sitting by their typewriter, pouring a stream of consciousness directly from their brain to the page. But in reality, it doesn't usually work that way. Most writers have editors and friends who read what they write and offer suggestions to improve, they spot plot holes and inconsistencies and contradictions. Two of my favorite writers, CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, were best friends, and they regularly met at their local pub and read aloud the latest excerpts of what they were working on, early drafts of the Narnia stories and the Lord of the Rings, being shared and edited together over a few drinks. And sometimes, that kind of collaboration makes a story better. But sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the people who read what you're writing want you to make changes for all the wrong reasons. Movie executives are infamous for telling directors and writers to make non-sensical changes to make the movie more marketable or family friendly – add in a funny sidekick here, a love interest there, and change the depressing ending to a happy one that leaves things open for a sequel. And if the writers or directors refuse to make those suggested changes, the producers are often more than happy to just fire them and bring in someone who will follow orders – there's a reason that a lot of movies have in the credits the names of five or six different people who all 'wrote' the script, because what was once one story got passed around from co-

writer to co-writer, each one adding their own contributions along the way. If you really believe the story you're writing is a masterpiece, a work of art, the last thing you want is someone coming in to change your vision to make it more marketable. If you're truly a genius, the last thing you want is a co-writer.

Keep that in mind when you hear the story we read this morning from 1 Samuel chapter 8. Last week, we heard the story of the calling of Samuel, the young boy growing up in the temple with his master Eli who hears God's call and dedicates his life to serving as God's prophet. And that's what he did – in the four chapters in between last week's reading and this week's reading, we see Samuel's entire life and ministry, and honestly, it's not that impressive – Samuel leads the people to a few victories over their enemies, but they also suffer more than a few defeats. And now in chapter 8, Samuel is an old man, nearing the end of a life of service to the people of Israel. And you might remember that God had called Samuel to serve as prophet because Eli had failed – Eli's sons and potential successors were corrupt, they were stealing from pilgrims and keeping the sacrifices for themselves, and so God replaced Eli's family and put Samuel in charge. But now, a lifetime later, the same thing is happening again – Samuel has installed his own sons as his intended successors, but just like Eli's sons, Samuel's sons are corrupt – they take bribes and pervert justice. And this is the same problem Israel has been facing for hundreds of years, ever since they first arrived in the promised land, they've always been led by these temporary leaders, judges raised up by God to save them from foreign oppression and slavery. The Judge defeats their enemies and helps them to muddle through for a few decades until that leader grows old and dies, and everything falls apart again. From Joshua to Othniel to Ehud to Deborah to Gideon to Jephthah to Samson to Eli to Samuel,

over and over and over again, God appoints judge after judge after judge, temporary leaders who solve their problems temporarily. And now that Samuel is getting up in years, it sure seems like this is the same old story happening again – just like all those other judges before him, Samuel is growing old without a worthy successor, and the people are left wondering what will happen in their story now.

But this time, the people decide they don't want to wait to find out. They've been living through this same story for hundreds of years, and they don't want to wait to meet the new leader who God pulls out of obscurity to serve as their judge. All the elders of Israel gather together and call Samuel to unveil their new plan. "Look, Sam, you've failed. You're a disaster, your kids are a disaster, it's just not working out. We've decided to take things in a different direction. We don't want judges anymore. We don't want You anymore. We want a King. All the other nations who keep conquering and enslaving us all the time – they all have Kings. They have a functional government with continuity, a designated predictable plan of succession, infrastructure, bureaucracy, institutional power centralized in one place, in one family. We've done it your way for hundreds of years, and it's time we tried something different, something new. Give us a King, to govern us and fight our battles and keep us safe." After centuries of watching the same old story play out again and again and again, the people step in and decide to write the story themselves – they've got their own ideas, their own plan for where this story should go next, and they're telling Samuel to step away from the typewriter and give someone else a turn to write the next chapter of their story.

And of course, Samuel is hurt. He has dedicated his life to these people, spent every moment since childhood trying to lead them to the best of his ability,

and to be so rudely rejected, it hurts. But when he brings their request to God, God points out that they aren't really rejecting Samuel's leadership – they're rejecting God's leadership. After all, every single leader that Israel has ever had to this point has been handpicked by God, and now the people are asking to take that decision out of God's hands and put it in theirs. But what's more, God points out to Samuel that what they're asking for isn't new. They look back at a cycle of leaders appointed by God who have delivered them from slavery to foreign masters, and they want to rewrite that story with a new King leading them into battle, but God tells Samuel that what they're doing is the same kind of rebellion, disobedience and pride that has caused all their troubles since they first left slavery in Egypt. The people aren't writing a new story, they're continuing the same old story that they've always been writing, a story where keep trying to put themselves in charge, try to define their own future and plot their own course, and it always ends up with them in chains, enslaved and persecuted by foreign masters, pleading for God to deliver them. And the only thing that will be different this time, under this supposedly new plan that the people have come up with, is that this time, the cruel oppressor who enslaves them won't be a foreign ruler. This time it'll be their own king, the king they chose for themselves, the king they wanted so badly so they could be just like everyone else, he will end up taking everything they hold dear from them and putting them back in chains, back in suffering, back in slavery. The people think they're writing a new story, starting a new beginning, but by taking the story out of God's hands they're just repeating the same mistakes they've been making over and over again, mistakes that keep leading them to slavery and death.

And yet, even though the people are repeating the same foolish choices that have caused so much misery and pain over the centuries, even though they are rejecting God's authority and demanding to take power for themselves, God doesn't get angry. God doesn't get frustrated. No, God decides to give them what they ask for. God decides to give them a King. But not the king they're expecting. Not the king who will make them like every other nation. When God tells Samuel to listen to their voice, Samuel is to warn them and show them the ways of the king, and that can be interpreted as a negative warning, which is clearly what Samuel thinks God wants, and that's the warning that Samuel gives. But God's instructions to Samuel can also be heard as a positive command – it can also be interpreted as God telling Samuel to describe what a King should really look like, a King who will follow God's ways instead of human ways, a King who will come to serve instead of rule, to set people free instead of put them in chains. That's the kind of King God wants to give the people, even though they don't deserve it. Even though they keep trying to rewrite God's story to put themselves in charge, God takes their rebellion and uses it to start something entirely new, God rewrites their story to bring them blessings and a future that the people could never have dreamed of on their own. Instead of a King who takes, who conquers, who enslaves, God will give the people a King who gives, who serves, who sets all captives free. No matter how badly they mess up, no matter how many times they try to seize control of their story and end up bringing suffering and trouble into the world, God keeps re-writing the story, keeps bringing it back to the original, good plans that have always been in place for the people, plans to prosper them and not to harm them, plans to give them hope and a future.

And the God who had such good plans for the people of Israel still has good plans for us today. We are still God's people, still called to follow and serve our saviour and King here in this world. And as God's church, we have all sorts of ideas of what that should look like, about what it means to be God's representatives here on earth. We've honestly believed that what God wants from us is grand cathedrals covered in gold and riches, or to launch crusades and colonial invasions to conquer other people, or to build residential schools to force our culture and language on kidnapped children. We are all too eager to write our own story, to send God our suggestions of what our future should look like, a future where we are in control of ourselves and of the world around us. And the more we do that – the more we try to set our own course for the future, the more we end up falling into the same mistakes of the past, the more we end up enslaved to the same enemies that have caused humanity so much misery. When the church seeks wealth and political power to achieve heavenly aims, we end up serving hell. When we think our future is all up to us, we end up in despair. We are the church of Jesus Christ, and we need to remember that God is the one who holds our future, God is the one who knows us and loves us, God is the one who has delivered us from every danger in the past and who has promised to lead us safely through trouble and pain to the good, good places in store for us, if we will only stop running off in our own directions and just follow Jesus Christ, follow our true King away from the thrones of gold and the halls of power and head for the cross. The future God has in store for us is already written, and it is so good, it is a story of blessings and love and everlasting life, and we cannot add anything to that story to make it any better, we cannot change one thing to improve on what God has planned for us, and even when we fail, even when we choose our

rebellion instead of God's good plans, our God still takes the messes we make and finds ways to bring them back to glory, bring us back to glory, to the glory we were always created for. There is nothing we can do that can ever derail or destroy God's plans for us. There is nothing we can do that can ever stop God's story from unfolding. All we have to do is to trust that our God is good, God's plans for us are good, and then follow, follow Jesus Christ, the true King, wherever he leads, so that God's story will be our story, today, and every day, until the kingdom comes. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.