

God's Story: Reluctant

2 Samuel 5:1-5

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After one full year of living here in Richmond, I've learned a few things. I've found a few really good sushi restaurants and some great bakeries, the best place to pick blueberries, where to park if you want to take the Skytrain downtown, and the most important lesson of all, never, ever try to make it through the Richmond Costco on a weekend. Or an evening. Or an afternoon, or right when they first open. Really, there's a short window from about 10:30 to 11 am where the place isn't quite as busy, but if you miss that, you're in trouble. I try to prepare before I get there, planning my route, double checking my list, so that I can be as efficient as possible when I'm actually in the store, but it only helps so much, and I know that no matter what I do, no matter how much I prepare, the checkout line I pick will be the slowest one. I'll try to pick the line where everyone has a half-empty buggy, but as soon as I make my choice, then suddenly everyone in front of me is pulling out their coupons or discovers a rotten piece of fruit in their bag, and all the other lines are zipping along while I'm stuck waiting for the only employee on call to search through the store for a new bag of fruit. And yet even though my line always seems to be cursed, once I've made my choice, I will not change. I don't care if they open up a new line right next to me

and try to wave me over, I've made my choice, I'm sticking with it, no matter what. And part of this is the worry that if I do change lanes, somehow that lane will end up being slower in the end, but it's mostly just stubbornness. Once I've made my choice, I will stick with that choice, even when it's abundantly clear that choice was a mistake.

And I thought about that when I read this morning's passage from the book of Samuel. It has been more than forty years since the people of Israel first came to the prophet Samuel and demanded that he give them a king, so they can be just like all the other nations around them. Samuel chose a man named Saul, and the entire nation enthusiastically declared their allegiance to their new King, but it didn't take long before it became very, very clear that they had made a bad choice. Saul just wasn't a good king. He started out with a few minor successes, but almost immediately, his flaws and failings came to the surface, and instead of helping make the nation stronger, he made everything worse. And then Samuel goes to Bethlehem, and secretly anoints a young boy named David as the true King of Israel, and almost immediately afterwards, David singlehandedly defeats the giant Goliath with only a sling and a few stones, he succeeds where Saul has failed. And from that moment onwards, everything that David touches turns to gold – he goes from success to success, leading Israel's armies from victory to victory, while Saul descends into jealousy and madness, trying to murder David at every opportunity, abandoning his responsibilities to

lead the nation and instead devoting himself to vengeance against his rival. Saul is a disaster as King, and yet all throughout his long, catastrophic reign, the people of Israel never abandon him, they never for a moment waver in their devotion to their mad miserable King. And that really is surprising, because David is right there. He's everything that Saul isn't – he's everything that you could possibly want in a King, the perfect ideal of what a King should look like and how a King should behave. And so when Saul's forty year reign finally comes to a shameful end, with a humiliating military defeat where Saul and most of his sons are killed, you would expect that now would be the time when everyone acknowledges the obvious, that David is clearly the right choice to serve as Israel's king – and one of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Judah, does exactly that – they proclaim David as their king. But the other eleven tribes refuse to go along with this, and instead, the people of Israel choose as their new King, Saul's last surviving son, Ishbosheth. And you can probably guess that Ishbosheth was not a successful king. His name literally means, Man of Shame, and he lived up to it, or down to it. His entire reign was spent with the kingdom torn by civil war, with eleven tribes under Ishbosheth fighting one tribe under David, and yet David kept winning, he was still unstoppable, leading Judah to victory after victory, while Ishbosheth stumbles and fumbles and eventually gets himself murdered by his own bodyguards. So the people of Israel have been following the house of Saul for over forty years at this point, forty

years of failure and madness and rebellion and death, and all that time they've refused for one single moment to consider that maybe, just maybe, they made the wrong choice. Maybe, just maybe, their choice was a mistake. They keep doubling down, stubbornly refusing to consider any other options in the royalty department, all while the perfect king is standing right there next to them, waiting for his chance to rule. It seems incredible that the people of Israel could be so stubborn, so hard-hearted that they can't recognize that David is a thousand times the king that Saul or Ishbosheth could ever be, but the thing is, I think they know. I'm sure they know that David is the better king, the better man, the better choice. But when they first came to Samuel all those years ago and demanded that he give them a king, they made it clear that they didn't want to follow God's leadership any longer – they wanted a King who would make them just like all the other nations, and that's the kind of King they got – Saul and Ishbosheth are exactly the kings that they asked for, exactly the kings they deserved. But they know that David is different. They know that David is a man after God's own heart, a man appointed and anointed to lead God's people as God's representative on earth, so they know that making David king will put them right back where they were before, with God calling the shots, and that's what they don't want. That's why they keep stubbornly offering the throne to all these scoundrels and cowards, ignoring and excusing all the times they mess up, that's why they're

willing to plunge the nation into civil war, because they want to be the ones calling the shots, they want to be the ones choosing the king.

Making David King is an admission that God is truly in control of Israel, and they resist that with everything they've got, they try every other alternative, every other option, before they will finally give in and admit that God knows better than they do who should rule their lives.

And that brings us to our reading this morning, the moment when the people of Israel finally give in. After all these years of stubbornly resisting God's choice for their king, they surrender, and ask David to be their king. And you would expect there to be a little more grovelling here, a little more begging and pleading, we're so sorry, David, we were wrong, you were the right choice all along, we should've listened years ago, please forgive us. But there isn't any of that. They're awfully chummy for people who started a civil war instead of letting David lead. "Look, we are your bone and flesh! We're all family here! Let's not bicker and argue about who killed who – let's put all that behind us and just look forward." They admit that while Saul was King, it was David who led Israel, it was David who was God's choice to lead the people, but they never explain why, if that was true, if they knew that was true, why they kept following Saul and Ishbosheth for all those years. Yes, the people are finally making the right choice, but they're doing it in the most reluctant way possible; they waited until they had literally no other option but David, and they're pretending that this was the plan all along.

And I have to say, if I was David, I wouldn't be anywhere near as gracious as he decides to be. I would have some choice words for these fair-weather followers, I would want them to grovel and beg for mercy. But David doesn't do that. He accepts their invitation without bitterness, without demanding vengeance against those who have wronged him. He takes his rightful place as the king they were always meant to have, the King God had wanted to bless them with all along. Even though the people messed up over and over and over again, even though they made the wrong choice and then stubbornly stuck to that mistake even when the right answer was right there in front of them, even so, God still chooses to bless this reluctant, stubborn, hard-hearted people with a King who will lead them to victory, a King who will serve to bring them closer to God.

And that is good news, because if we are being honest, we have a lot more in common with those stubborn, hard-hearted, reluctant people than we want to admit. Each and every day of our lives, we have to decide who we are going to follow; which King will we listen to, which ruler will we put in charge of our lives. And there are all sorts of Sauls and Ishbosheths that we set up as Kings over us, false, failing authorities who we think will bring us glory and success and yet only cause more pain, more suffering, more death. We can allow ourselves to be ruled by wealth, by pleasure, by politics, by fear. We can allow our desire to be in control to control us, our need for power over our lives to enslave us.

And all these rulers, all they will bring us is more pain, more madness, more death. Saul can't save us. Ishbosheth can't lead us. All these false and failing Kings we serve here on this earth are only pale imitations of what a true King should be. When we look to Jesus Christ, we see what a King should truly be, a King who serves, who loves, who lays down his life so that others might live, that's what a true King looks like, that's the King we know we are meant to follow, the King we are meant to serve. And yet we are still so reluctant. We've made our choice, and even though we know it's a mistake, even though we know there's a King who's infinitely better than we could ever ask or imagine, just waiting for us to come and follow, come and serve, come and give our allegiance once and for all, even then we still find it so hard to give in, to admit our wrong and come and kneel at the foot of the cross and proclaim that Jesus Christ is our bone and flesh, our shepherd and king. We can be so stubborn, so hard-hearted, so reluctant to follow; we still want to believe that we're the ones calling the shots, we want to be the ones choosing our king. Making Jesus our King is admitting that God is truly in control of our lives, admitting that God knows better than we do who should rule our lives. And that is still hard to do. And yet our God is so gracious, and so patient. Christ takes our reluctant, half-hearted, hard-hearted allegiance, and gathers us in as his people. Even when we are still reluctant sheep, wandering away from the shepherd's fold, Christ still seeks us out and calls us his own and brings us back into his

loving care. Jesus Christ takes us as we are, accepts our half-hearted declarations of faith, our feeble attempts at holiness, our stubborn and reluctant allegiance, and Christ makes us his people, his children, the beloved sheep of a shepherd who is infinitely better than we could ever deserve. And when we start to follow that King – when we finally kneel before Jesus Christ and let him reign in our hearts – then we start to see what a true King is meant to be. We start to see how empty and hollow all the Sauls and Ishbosheths of this world truly are. Jesus Christ is ready to heal our stubborn, reluctant hearts and to rule in our lives as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Today, may we leave behind every other King, every other ruler, and give ourselves in service of the one who died to save us and set us free. Christ is our King. May we follow him. Amen.