

1 Samuel 8:4-20

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the Lord, and 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. Just 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. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 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; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

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

Mark 3:20-35

...and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (697)

This is what Jesus came to do: he came to bind the strong man and plunder his house. This, according to the Gospel of Mark, was Jesus’ mission in the world: to bind the strong man and plunder his house.

There’s even a recent commentary on the Gospel of Mark called *Binding the Strong Man*. I use it. It’s good.

Each of the four gospels understands Jesus in a particular way. Each understands Jesus’ *mission* in a particular way, which corresponds to how each understands the world and what exactly the problem here is. What’s the problem that Jesus is the solution to?

According to Mark, the problem here is that the world has fallen to hostile occupying forces, spirits other than holy ones. Spirits of exploitation and oppression, spirits of menace, even terror: satanic stuff.

What, you don’t believe in Satan?

I get that.

When the people Israel had lived in the land for a few generations, they’d begun to clamor for a king. This was around the year 1100 BCE, three thousand years ago or so. They’d lived by the Law as given by the Lord, as received by Moses. By this Law, they had some semblance of social order in the wilderness as they wandered. Now settled in the Promised Land, they were a loose confederation of tribes governed by the *ad hoc* rule of a series of judges. These judges, neither elected nor of some certain bloodline, were anointed, self-appointed though by discernment with the Lord—the Lord God who was actually to be their king. The Lord, who had led them out of enslavement in Egypt, who had claimed them for service to him and him alone: under him they were to be a people of justice, a people of righteousness and equality and mercy.

It was no easy task.

So, the judges—a series, fifteen of them over 175 years or so—rose to prominence mostly during times of crisis, when these tribes would need to come together to do battle with foreign peoples. The Moabites. The Edomites. The Philistines. The judges were more military leaders than

judges as we know them. They would rise and lead, sometimes win and sometimes lose. It was all very cobbled together as needed.

It was something of a mess. It was incredibly stressful.

Samuel, it would turn out, was the last of the judges—because the people had begun to clamor that they wanted a king. And not some mystical, glory-amidst-the-cloud-on-a-mountaintop king. But a *king*, an actual, embodied, human king—with a crown, with a cape, with an *army*.

An army: now that they had land, they needed an army.

I have a friend who's a political theorist, a professor at McGill and senior fellow at a libertarian "think tank." He teaches this event of the people rejecting the kingship of the Lord, this event of the people clamoring for a king; he teaches it in his survey course, early in the semester—a people storied at revolt and a subsequent choosing their form of government, an early people storied at surrendering their freedom for the sake of power and security.

Apparently, it's a tale as old as time.

Samuel took it personally. But in prayer it was urged upon him otherwise, the Lord saying in essence, "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."

Before giving the people what they wanted, though, Samuel was to fill out the picture more fully for them. He was to warn them, "This is what a king is good for. He will take your sons and make them either soldiers for his war-making or slaves for his well-being. He will take your daughters and make them either concubines in his harem or slaves in his household. He will take your property for his court and your livestock for his stable; he'll tax you to fill his treasury. Perhaps worst of all, he'll become king instead of the Lord your king, and on the day when you cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord won't answer you."

At this, the people answered, "Sounds good. Give us that."

It's struck me as funny in the past. Such a bad bargain, it's almost silly, their answer was. I mean, who would actually agree to those terms?

"No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 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." It doesn't seem funny anymore.

Donald Trump apparently thinks he'll be "reinstated" in August. Worse, there are plenty of people who'll lean into that delusion, who might even try to make it a reality. Maybe January 6th wasn't an aberration.

Erich Fromm, his midcentury classic, *Escape from Freedom*: he wrote it in America in 1941, reflecting upon his home country, Germany. The war was still raging. Hitler was still raving, he whom the German people had elected. The summation on the book's back cover is thus, a warning, "If humanity cannot live with the dangers and responsibilities inherent in freedom, it will probably turn to authoritarianism." *Escape from freedom*.

This is the problem Jesus came as solution to—according to Mark anyway. Mark's Jesus: he wasn't much about personal piety, he was mostly about a radical form of politics. And it was dangerous, this form of politics; it was crazy, to think it could actually ever be enacted. He was out of his mind! Freedom, unbounded love. I mean, how? How is this actually to happen? Have you never spent even a moment in this world? Have you ever seen how power actually plays out, generates itself, justifies itself?

Oh, but you don't believe in Satan, do you?

Well, *satan* is one of those biblical terms that's become a proper noun and so seems to name a discrete entity—cloven-hooved, with the head of a goat, or something the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live is obsessed with. "Could it be....Satan?" You'd have to be a fool to believe in such a thing.

But, *satan*: like the term *adam*, which originally indicated dirt or clay, it's become a proper name, so we take to indicate a discrete entity. Adam in the Garden with his wife Eve, so also with Satan, a term, *ha-satan*, whose original meaning was accuser or adversary, which suggests the better way to think about this thing named here is less as an entity and more as a dynamic, a generating event. The satanic is anything that operates in accusation. The satanic is that which is adversarial, accusatorial, the "blame game," which, once that gets started, it's near impossible to turn around, it seems rather like it could go on forever, an eternal sin in the way that it just seems like it could go on forever.

Like Israel/Palestine. A couple weeks ago, during the latest outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas, an NPR host introduced an NPR reporter from Middle East bureau with the question, "How did this all begin?" and the reporter paused for more time than the radio usually allows. "Well..." Was it a few days ago? Was it a few decades ago? Was it a few millennia ago?

What's more, to blaspheme is simply to blame. This religious concept, this heavy thing: to blaspheme simply means to blame. They're the same word, with the same notional root. To blaspheme is to speak evil of, which is to blame. So, this eternal sin of which Jesus spoke, this blaspheming of the Holy Spirit: it's eternal because to blame is to engage in a dynamic that really

feels could go on forever, for as long as time allows. And to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to blame the thing which is actually the source of forgiveness, is the possibility of forgiveness. So, to blame the Holy Spirit is to reject the way out of an engulfing dynamic of accusation, which makes the sin goes on forever.

Let loose. Automatic. Self-generating, self-justifying.

It's really a matter of what's been let loose, of what you let loose, for the verb for forgiveness is *aphiemi*, which operates out of a sense of released or freed or unbound. This according to Matt Skinner, a scholar of the New Testament. He explains that whatever we understand "forgiveness" to entail must involve more than "simply eluding punishment or escaping responsibility for a misdeed. It must involve a release, a freeing," an unbinding, a letting loose.

So, which are you gonna let loose—accusation or forgiveness, blame and blasphemy or freedom, love?

I know you know what you're supposed to answer here. But think about it. Think about it in your body, in your relationships. To come to the right answer in your lived reality: it's difficult. It's the most difficult thing there is. Truly to let loose forgiveness? Truly to forgo blame and blasphemy, truly to unbind forgiveness and let loose love? You'd have to be out of your mind to think this could be so.

For this, Jesus' family came to him—came to him to restrain him, to bind *him* up.

They did so, let's presume, out of love and concern. This was dangerous, what he was proposing. It was also a bit embarrassing—that he would take it upon himself to make the powers and principalities tremble at their root. I mean, who was he? He was no one. He was some nobody from nowhere, now wandering Galilee, casting out demons in individual people, one here, one there, a micro-event of the macro-event he would aim eventually to enact, casting out the demonic on a geo-political scale.

Meanwhile, the scribes were just as eager to get Jesus to stop as his family was, but for different cause.

We know they were eager because they'd come all the way from Jerusalem, a trip of about 80 miles, which would have taken them about four days to make. And these: they were high up in the Temple hierarchy. These scribes: they were high up in the political arrangement that the Jews had with Rome, an arrangement all mediated in and through the Temple, this center of power, both religious and political power.

Remember, in the ancient world there'd have been no separating the religious from the political. On the contrary, the scribes, like all the Temple staff, had the uneasy privilege of negotiating with Rome, this enormous, complicated, violent empire, while also negotiating with the people, this variegated people who ran the gamut from Zealots, who'd have wanted nothing whatsoever of negotiating with any foreign empire, to Herodians, who'd have wanted just to make it all work, whatever the cost, and maybe garner some power for themselves while they were at it.

Exceptionalism and pragmatism: these make for an uneasy mix.

Worse, when made to mix under the menacing eye of a mindless, violent imperial over-force, it could be downright scary.

For this, the scribes beat feet from their Temple seat to the outpost Galilee, where this nobody from nowhere was calling out what was in everyone's best interest to give cover to. So, there was oppression. So, there was injustice. So, there was an outbreak of violence every once in a while. A crucifixion here, a burned village there. So, what? The likes of Billy Graham would eulogize the likes of Richard Nixon, and history would go down as smooth as chocolate milk. When religious power works with political power, when religious power gives cover to political power: it just makes everything more stable. I mean, a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand—and who wants that? A house divided against itself cannot stand, and then what are we to do with all the rubble? Just leave well enough alone.

In this way, the scribes and Jesus' family were up to the same thing. The scribes meant for the kingdom to remain standing. Jesus' family meant for the house to remain standing.

Jesus, for his part, had no loyalty to either the kingdom or the house, even his own household, had loyalty only to the reign of God, this which kingdoms will in effect stand against and which households too will in effect stand against—because we'll choose the familiar over the good almost every time. We'll choose the reliable over the good—we humans, we Americans, we of the middle class, I of this middle age. The likes of me: we'll choose security over freedom in the Lord any day of the week, and we'll even mistake the good for evil if (when) the good arrives in resistance or rejection of the way things are. Remember: Martin Luther King was considered an enemy of the state; and Billy Graham made nice with him, but kept tighter still with segregations, while Graham's pal Nixon spied on King, called him a monkey and worse. You do what you have to do.

If you believe the way things are is good, then you'll mistake as evil anything that calls all that into question.

If you believe the status quo is the will of God manifest, then any shaking of its foundations will come across as deeply wrong.

But if you defend the status quo against any such shaking, then, sorry to say, you'll be defending against the Holy Spirit. And the more you dig in your heels, the more you're foreclosing on the coming of the Holy Spirit. The more defensive you become of the illusions of this world, the negotiating, the compromising, the dazzling displays of power meant to conceal the deep cavities, rotten fruits of corruption, the more you're foreclosing on the indwelling and moving of the Holy Spirit.

You'll be blaming the good for what threat it poses to what's evil.

But this seems like a pretty easy mistake to make, or at least a pretty common mistake to make. Social order has appeal, wouldn't you say? And appearances can be deceiving, wouldn't you say? And whose fault is it when you're deceived? Some things are really convincing in their deception.

It's this: this is the problem Jesus came as solution to. This is the problem according to Mark: that the world has fallen to the occupying presence of so much that's unholy, so much that's even satanic, which is to say accusatory and adversarial. So the world simply spins on amidst death-dealing dynamics, which such spirits have let loose, while to safeguard against these things, we'll turn to strong men, who promise—they promise!—they'll keep us all safe. But they don't. They simply engage those dynamics all the more, in new and inventive ways.

This is the evil genius of the satanic: simply to say the word is to engage the dynamic. As soon as you name something as adversarial or accusatorial, you yourself are being adversarial and accusatorial. And we're used to our words having more distance from reality than that. We're used to some degrees of separation between the word spoken and the reality named. In the case of the satanic, though, there is no separation. To say the word is to unleash the dynamic, so we must be very careful here.

This is the problem Jesus came as solution to: to bind this dynamic so it will be frustrated in its power to act, and to let loose something else altogether. Forgiveness. Love.

And you'd have to be out of your mind to believe this is possible.

You'd have to be from out of this world.

But this is our hope—we of the church.

Samuel's ancient warning still speaks. We have the chance right now to make a different choice.

Thanks be to God.