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**“We Want a King”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**10th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
June 10, 2018
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35, 1 Samuel 8:4-22**

On Saturday May 19 at noon in London an estimated 29 million people in the United States tuned in to watch the much-anticipated wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markel. That 29 million doesn't include folks like me who watched the service through Facebook live. As expected, it was a grand and glorious service. More than that, though, it was a service unlike any other royal wedding up to this point. The usual suspects were there, of course - the Royal family, the Archbishop of Canterbury, leaders of state, celebrities. But there were also some unexpected faces in the line-up, including Bishop Michael Curry, the former Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of NC, now the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US. The unexpected 19-year-old Sheku Kanneh-Mason captivated our spirits with his intense and passionate cello-playing. Ben E. King's "Stand By Me" graced the musical line-up, as well as the expected traditional English choral anthems and hymns. For the first time, the faces in the center of the pomp and circumstance were not all white. For this reason, many longed to be in the architecturally stunning St. George's Chapel of Windsor Castle for this truly momentous occasion.

As they did for Prince William and Kate Middleton’s wedding in 2011, our U.S. media outlets gave this event plenty of before and after coverage and many people still couldn’t get enough.

So, here’s my question: Apart from the ground-breaking events taking place in this *particular* royal wedding, why do we care so much about the royal pomp and circumstance? Why do we in the United States, a country formed quite intentionally without a monarchy (with George Washington famously resisting the temptation to be named king when offered the chance) care so much about the monarchy of Great Britain? Why do we obsess over these weddings and love TV series like *Downton Abbey*, *The Crown*, and *Victoria*?

The first explanation [writes Huffington Post] may seem fairly obvious, but it’s meaningful: “We are fascinated and obsessed with fairy tales. They have been a part of our society’s fabric since childhood. They help us escape from the everyday mundane. . . .”

“The marriage of Meghan and Harry is especially playing into that fairy tale fascination for Americans because she is an American, and she’s biracial,” [says Arianna] Chernock [of Boston University]. “There are a lot of elements of their particular story that appeal to that narrative.”¹

But Maya Jasanoff, professor of British History at Harvard, comes the closest, in my opinion, to understanding what might be at the root of our love of the British monarchy. She writes:

¹ Caroline Bologna, “Here’s Why Americans Are so Obsessed with the Royals,” *Huffington Post*, updated May 15, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/british-royal-family-obsession_us_5a4b0788e4b025f99e1d0a4b, accessed 6-8-18).

“We lost a connection to hallowed traditions of the kind on which nations so often rely to confer legitimacy and create unity. Well into the 19th century, Americans were haunted by a sense of cultural, political and economic inferiority to Britain. Even today, we import media personalities, intellectuals and cultural icons from Britain, while exporting legions of young Americans to acquire some old world polish in British universities.”²

In our passage for today, it is easy to imagine that the elders of Israel might also have been haunted by some sense of cultural, political and economic inferiority to the powerful nations surrounding them. After all, they say it clearly, “appoint for us, then a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). And later, “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” (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

Now, it is important to understand that the nation of Israel has *never* before had a king. They have had leaders – Moses, of course, followed by Joshua. They have had judges – Deborah, Gideon, Samson. They have had priests, like Eli, and prophets, like Samuel. But they have never had a king. They were a distinct community, a called and chosen people. They didn’t live the way of other nations. They were set apart through their identity, character and vocation. They were God’s people. The people of Yahweh. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Israel’s early tradition affirmed that Israel had a peculiar relation with Yahweh, the God of the covenant (cf. Ex. 19:3-6). Therefore, Israel was to practice a peculiar form of social and political power. This peculiar relation to Yahweh and

² Maya Jasanoff, “Our Love of the Royals Reflects and Insecurity Over What We Lost,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/05/31/why-do-americans-love-the-british-royal-family/our-love-of-the-royals-reflects-an-insecurity-over-what-we-lost> (accessed 6-8-18).

the peculiar form of social power derived from the relation proved to be a costly embarrassment to Israel. Israel is regularly restless with its demanding peculiarity. In its restlessness, Israel began to seek ways to be less peculiar and more “like the nations.”³

Now the elders were not coming forward with this proposal without some incentive. The sons of Samuel, who had been appointed as judges over Israel, were corrupt. They “took bribes and perverted justice.” Something needed to change. And the way of the nations looked like a pretty good plan. Why couldn’t they be like the nations around them and still be faithful?

And yet, even knowing this, their demand for a king is still a complete and total rejection of Yahweh’s sovereignty.

Samuel tries to make it about him, but Yahweh makes it plain:

“they have not rejected you – 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. . .” (vv. 7-8).

We might expect YHWH to come up with the understandable response as a parent to a child: “Forget it. You aren’t getting a human king. You want to be like everyone else? Tough. I know what is best. No King. Deal with it.”

But that isn’t YHWH’s response. Instead, he responds using another parental strategy. “Fine,” he tells Samuel. “Give them what they want. But make sure they know what the consequences will be. I don’t want them to come whining back to me saying I

³ *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation Series, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 66.

didn't warn them. This monarchy thing is not all it's cracked up to be. But they will have to learn that the hard way. Sometimes that's the best way to learn."

So Samuel makes clear what the consequences will be, what they will have to give up, and the ways that life won't be the same again. The elders listen and accept the terms. "We are determined to have a king."

"Make it so," says Yahweh. "They shall have a king." And very soon afterward, Saul is chosen, anointed, and made the first king of Israel. As predicted, things start to unravel for the Israelites. They have put their trust in an earthly king and rejected their Lord, their Sovereign, their God. They will learn the hard way what that means for them.

We can't really blame the elders, you know. I mean everyone around them had a king. Everyone around them had coronation festivities not unlike royal weddings – with pomp and circumstance and bells and trumpets and choirs and important people all over the place. They saw their royal horses and their royal robes and their mighty armies. Why would they not want that? Why would they want stay being peculiar? After all, couldn't they have all that and still be faithful to God? Did the acceptance of the way of the world necessarily mean a rejection of God? Did it?

Well . . . yes.

In an attempt to be like the other nations, God's people gave their allegiance to a mere human. The people of YHWH chose another god to worship and serve. They chose another god to protect and save them. They chose another god in which to put their trust.

And it did make all the difference. Even today, choosing an earthly god does make all the difference. Because those other gods, kings, and rulers are transient; they are human, and they come unraveled even as we cling so tightly to them.

So why can't we let Yahweh be our God? Why can't we trust God to protect us, provide for us, guard us, and save us?

Why do we have so much trouble living into the "peculiarity" of our calling as God's people? Why do we feel like we have to be "like the nations," "like everyone else"?

If we live into the covenant God intends for us, we are not "like the nations."

After all, the nations put their trust in their money, in their resources. They build a safety net and become afraid for their future if funds diminish.

But the people of God do not store up treasures for ourselves on earth, where moths and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but we store up treasures in heaven. For we know that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

The nations, as we know, cling to youth. They idolize the young and the beautiful and try to persuade others that the ultimate goal in life is to look as youthful as possible. The nations buy into commercial creams and adjustments and surgeries that promise eternal youth. They purchase fast cars and obsess about their gym routines in order to hold onto youth as long as possible.

But the people of God know that with God we will run and not be weary, we will walk and not faint, we will find our strength renewed and will mount up with wings like eagles, no matter our age, no matter our physical condition.

The nations, as we know, cling to power, position, image, and reputation.

But the people of God cling to the promises of God that come to us in Jesus Christ. As the old hymn says, we cling to the old rugged cross. We cling to that love which will not let us go.

We hold fast to God alone, serving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind.

We don't need an earthly king or queen, or an earthly ruler, or an earthly idol. We trust in the one true God who will never leave us or forsake us, who has defeated death for us, and who is present with us daily by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have a choice. We can in fear cry out for an earthly king, for money, or youth, or power or anything which will give us security, even if momentary. Or we can trust in our heavenly king, our God, our Lord, and find all the security, strength, and love we could ever need.

One of my favorite authors and theologians, Howard Thurman, writes a poem which those elders of Israel might have benefited from thousands of years ago. I share with you part of his poem and dedicate it especially to our newest members joining the church this morning.

Thurman writes,

The Lord is!

He is more than tongue can tell,

Than mind can think, than heart can feel!

The Lord is my strength.

When day is done and in weariness I lay me down to sleep,

When fear becomes a lump in my throat and an illness in my stomach,

When the waters of temptation engulf me and I strangle beneath the waves,
When I have thought myself empty and the solution to my problem hides,
Lurking in the shadows of my mind,
When the disease of my body tightens its grip and my doctor picks up the broken lances of his skill and knowledge and takes his leave,
When the tidings are of brooding clouds of war,
And of marching feet and humming planes moving in the awful rhythm of the dirge of death –
The Lord is the strength of my life.
Of whom
And of what
Shall I be afraid?⁴

In the name of our one true monarchy. Our God and our King forever. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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⁴ Howard Thurman, “The Lord Is the Strength of My Life,” *Deep Is the Hunger*, (San Francisco: Ravenio Books, 1951).