

Regret and God's Plan

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1 Samuel 15:10-23; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Mark 4:26-34

"The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king. . . .'" -- 1 Samuel 15:10-11

The Old Testament lesson this morning takes us back into the world of that anthropomorphic deity called Yahweh, the Lord, that most of us would prefer to ignore. That anthropomorphic deity looks a lot like us, sounds a lot like us, acts a lot like us, and seems a lot like us – so much so, in fact, that skeptics claim that there's no deity at all, just us.

Let's keep an open mind about the skeptics, but focus our attention on that deity who came to the prophet Samuel spiritually with the startling news, "I regret that I made Saul king."

That's God speaking to Samuel in some sort of spiritual communication that the Bible calls "the word of the Lord": "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. . ." Genesis 15:1; "So Moses enrolled them according to the word of the Lord, as he was commanded," Numbers 3:16; "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord," 1 Samuel 3:21; "Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon," 1 Kings 6:11; "The word of the Lord came to Jehu," 1 Kings 16:1, and so on.

The phrase occurs over 250 times in the Hebrew Bible, and the word of the Lord was the way prophets and those who accepted prophets believed that God communicated with them. Prophets and kings and everyone who believed that God was still speaking believed they heard God speaking to them in various ways – sometimes as part of a vision, like Isaiah had in the year that king Uzziah died, and sometimes simply as a still, small voice, such as came to Elijah in the cave.

But however it came, the divine message was meant to be shared. It was never for the hearer alone, and that's why Samuel was told that God regretted having made Saul king over Israel. Saul had turned out to be a disobedient leader. He'd gone off to battle with the Amalekites, won the battle with God's help, and then kept the best of the spoils as war booty as though he had won the battle – and thus revealed to God and to his people that he was the kind of leader most leaders are: I did this, I succeeded at that, I brought the other thing to pass, I deserve this credit, this recognition, I deserve the best.

That's what Saul's holding back the best of the war booty demonstrated – that lack of absolute trust in God that is the mark of the genuine servant believer. Most of us are like Saul: we trust God a little bit, we trust God sometimes, we trust God with some things, but few of us trust God completely. We say, of course, that God will provide, but we're going to lay up a few treasures for ourselves here on earth just in case.

So God regretted having made Saul king. God admitted to the prophet Samuel

that he'd goofed, or at least that things had not gone according to plan, and that it was time to change directions. That's what repentance is – a change of mind and a change of directions. God regretted and repented.

That's what we read about God in that colorful story from ancient Israel's early history, and it's a depiction of God that's quite different from the understanding of God that you and I carry around with us.

We think of God as an unchanging presence beyond all the messiness of life, beyond all the changes and chances, beyond all the false starts and backing out of situations that you and I have to do.

"Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not," is the way we sing it in *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, and the book of Hebrews (13:8) says that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever."

That's the way we like our God. Constant, steady, unchanging, reliable. Eliot's "still point of the turning world."

But perhaps the Bible's more dynamic depiction of God in those highly anthropomorphic stories isn't as intellectually shabby as we might at first think. If we have enough theological sophistication – and it doesn't take a great deal – not to over-literalize these stories about God's walking and talking and getting angry and having regret and displaying all those other human-like traits that seem unbecoming to a proper deity – if we can read these texts more like a poem of Robert Frost and less like a telephone book – it's possible that they might tell us something worth listening to, something wise, something beneficial, in short, they might have for us some word from the Lord.

There isn't one of us here this morning who has no regrets. Yes, I know in the movies and in popular songs people say they have no regrets, but a person with no regrets either isn't paying attention or they're suffering from amnesia. A regret is what you have when you realize you've made a mistake, and we all make those. Oops, we say, I wish I hadn't done that. I wish I hadn't made that turn back there. I wish I hadn't said that. I wish I hadn't bought the cheaper model. I wish I'd paid more attention in school. I wish I hadn't dropped out of school. I wish I'd taken better care of myself. I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry. I wish I'd listened to my gut. I wish I'd spoken up sooner and louder.

Far from being things to avoid, regrets are the things that tell us that our moral compasses are still functioning. Regrets help get us where we need to be. Regrets tell us when we've messed up. Regrets tell us that we can still recognize good from bad, right from wrong, the beneficial from the harmful.

"I regret that I made Saul king." Saul was leading God's people in a direction that God knew wasn't right for them, and since it was God's decision that had made Saul their leader, it was now God's regret. And that regret was the spur for God to make a different decision – the decision to remove Saul and find a better leader. And so God regretted and so God acted.

Have you done the same? What have you done with your regrets? What have you done with your mistakes, your false turns, your misbegotten plans, your dashed hopes, your smashed dreams?

Have you done what most of us do with our regrets, which is to stash them in some remote corner of our consciousness and hope that no one will ever find out about them and that they'll not bother us again, or at least not bother us much?

Or have you convinced yourself that your regrets really aren't your regrets at all, but rather they're somebody else's bad behavior that's been inflicted on you?

Or are you denying regrets altogether and pretending that your actions and

decisions don't really matter in the long run? That what looks like a regret, feels like a regret, hurts like a regret really isn't a regret, it's just life, so let's move on and pretend the actions don't matter and the pain isn't real.

People who cannot admit to having regrets are victims not of other people's behavior but of their own pride. People who cannot admit they've made a mistake – and experience the regret of having done so – have very little hope of growing spiritually or emotionally or socially. People with no regrets are people with no usable past, and if your past isn't usable, you've wasted it, and your past is a lot of life to waste.

Most of us are afraid to admit that we have regrets because we don't think God can use our mistakes. We've bought into the American worship of success and think that our successes reflect our faithfulness.

Nothing could be further from the truth of the Christian gospel. At the level of plain, unvarnished, unverifiable history, Jesus of Nazareth was a spectacular failure. He came from poverty, lived his life in poverty, and died in poverty. His career lasted perhaps as long as three years and maybe as briefly as one. He attracted a group of followers who deserted him when he got into serious trouble. His message was regularly misunderstood even by his closest associates. He was tortured and executed in a way that was designed to shame not only him but those associated with him, and he died homeless, childless, and penniless. By any earthly standard, Jesus' life was a dismal failure.

But God's standards and our standards are vastly different. "God chose what is foolish in the world," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

God doesn't operate the way we operate. God doesn't wait for us to become successful before choosing us. God doesn't wait for us to prove ourselves worthy. God doesn't wait to call us until we're ready; it's God's call that makes us ready.

And God calls us regrets and all. If God can live with regrets, so can we. If God can bring something beautiful out of a mistake, so can we. If God can find us in the deepest thicket of our confused choices and decisions, then we can find God. There is no regret, my friends, that God cannot redeem.

When Jesus told us, quoting the book of Deuteronomy, to love God with all our hear, mind, and strength, he didn't say, "But not with your regrets." He didn't say to leave those out as excess baggage. He didn't say that God would charge us extra to love us *and* our regrets. He told us that redemption is ours when we love God with all that we have and are, including our regrets.

"I regret that I made Saul king," was the word of the Lord that came to Samuel and has come to us. If God can admit God's regrets to us, don't you think we can do the same to God?