

After the end of the previous book, the book of Judges, there was a paradigm shift for the people of Israel. While wandering in the wilderness, God was their king. When they settled down in Canaan, it was still understood that God was their king. Moses and his successors in leadership operated on a small and familiar scale, never more than one degree of separation away from the people, and always of course in direct relationship to God. But by the end of the book of Judges, perhaps because of the increasing size of the population and the complexity of governing it, this system of judges seems to be ineffective. The last sentence of the book is “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” It’s an ominous line.

That ominous line is followed early in the book of Samuel with the bleak observation that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” The high priest, Eli, is nearly blind, and his sons are corrupt. This is the book in which the first king of Israel will be anointed. It opens however, not with a wide-angle lens, but a close-up: the family of Elkanah son of Jeroham, and particularly one of his two wives, Hannah. Although Elkanah loves Hannah best, she is barren, and desperate for a son. She prays earnestly at the Temple for a son, but the blind-in-more-than-one-sense priest Eli thinks she must be drunk, and scolds her. In due time, though, her request is fulfilled, and Hannah prays the joyous prayer that Mary of Nazareth later echoes in her Magnificat: “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.”

If you remember the Magnificat, you have a sense of what comes next: a recital of the ways in which God makes surprising reversals in human fortunes.

“Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; brings down to Sheol and raises up.” And so on. Hannah’s song is actually longer than Mary’s, and gives more examples of the ways that God reverses human order. When we classify texts by literary genre, this song falls into the category of “song of national thanksgiving.” How is Hannah’s very private, very small-bore, motherly song a song of national thanksgiving? Well, that’s one of the ways God reverses things—what seems small and insignificant is often world-shaking. This long-sought son of Hannah’s will reverse the trend of darkness and silence; he will hear the voice of God and see clearly where to find leadership. Samuel will anoint King Saul and later King David, ending the anarchy in which each person did “what was right in their eyes.” Rather than focusing upon the corridors of power, the first moves of God’s great national and cosmic purposes in history appear in the unwitnessed intimacy of domestic and personal struggles and in the persevering faith of an obscure woman without political power or public influence. (find source)

After last Sunday’s presidential candidates’ debate, from social media there blossomed a viral cult around one of the citizen questioners, a man named Kenneth Bone. Mr. Bone had asked a thoughtful question, “What steps will your energy policy take to meet our energy needs while at the same time remaining environmentally friendly and minimizing job layoffs?” People liked that intelligent question, but even more (in typical superficial internet style) they liked his appearance: he’s somewhat overweight, has black-rimmed glasses, and wore a

bright red sweater. I am in no way praising the superficiality of the herd on social media when I say this, but I think that the combination of an intelligent question and an unassuming countenance just came as such a relief after the tension and theatricality of the whole election season that Ken Bone instantly became a folk hero. People loved that he'd been going to wear his olive suit but he split the pants, and they loved that he brought a disposable camera to the event so he could take pictures afterwards. I think Ken Bone symbolizes to people the continued existence of decent, thoughtful people in our country, when our leaders seem to be so untrustworthy. We take tremendous comfort in realizing that there are still just solid, good people out there, because we are so disappointed and disillusioned.

And you know, that's kind of what Hannah was getting at. "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes." God accomplishes God's great /goals/ by means of small and obscure people. Don't chase after the rich and famous to see what God's going to do; hang around with the likes of Ken Bone.

One commenter bemoaned the lost opportunity at last Sunday's debate to lift up the Black Lives Matter movement. After all, the debate took place in St. Louis, and consciousness among white people about the daily challenges that people of color deal with every day is still not very high. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump should have been asked to give some attention to the issue, but they were not. However, Capitol Hill Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on the east side of Des Moines, is paying attention. Their pastor, Candice, is a friend of mine, and I've been following what they do with interest. They have a building, so they've sought out

three small congregations to “nest” in their building, to use their worship and classroom space. One of those congregations is an African American Baptist congregation, and they and the Capitol Hill Disciples are very intentionally getting to know each other. They have a prayer meeting and dinner every couple months, and this weekend they put together a neighborhood festival, with hot dogs and a bounce house, and heaven knows what else. Candice says that these projects require some stretching and learning from her congregation, simply because the way the two communities go about things is different—the other congregation doesn’t necessarily show up right on time, and the way they go about pulling together supplies seems less systematic than her way—but those are just things to learn when you want to do things together. Her congregation is also learning how frequently African Americans are stopped while driving, and how parents teach their children to be on the defensive for a whole panoply of potential threats that white people don’t think about.

I submit to you that this is where God is working on racial justice—not so much in the corridors of power, but in the fellowship hall at Capitol Hill Christian Church. This is the place from which mountains will be moved. This is how you overcome racism, by doing it where you are. I asked Candice if she thought her congregation would like to join Jubilee, and she said, “Oh, it just sounds wonderful, and right up our alley, but honestly right now we’re really focusing on racism and it’s taking all our time and energy.” To which I say, God bless you, because you are small but mighty, and what you are doing is so important. You cannot say “yes” to everything.

1 Samuel 2:9 contains the statement, “not by might does one prevail.” Indeed, all human ways to exert power fall short in comparison with God, who can reverse human circumstances of status and power. And although this is when the monarchy begins, a remarkable innovation for Israel and arguably a step forward in global political positioning, we are always reminded that one does not prevail by might but by the will of God. The great do not accomplish great things; God accomplishes great things with small people.

This is Jubilee Sunday, when we lift prayers for those who are in debt, particularly this year those caught by predatory lenders and those with student debt. Some very wealthy people have enriched themselves by preying on the poor through payday loans and student loans. I will just say again, “not by might does one prevail.” They’re coming down, and those who were hungry will be fat with spoil. Congregations like ours and Capitol Hill Christian are just getting started. Let us pray: God who answers prayer, we are blessed and humbled that you hear us when we call to you in our time of deepest longing. Receive our gratitude for your listening ear. Bless our own efforts to be faithful with what we have, where we have it, and let us always remember that it is not by might that one prevails, but by your will. May we remember today those who suffer under the burden of debt, and those who work to change your world. We pray that we too may be a spokespeople for your justice in order to change lives - to end debts - to make your Kingdom real. Amen.