

THE OLD WAYS AND THE NEW

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But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." (1 Samuel 8:6)

Much of politics today – and perhaps not just today but always – seems to be a struggle between progressives and what is often referred to as “the Old Guard.” Progressives want change, and lots of it. They want it now, and they generally want someone else to pay for it. The Old Guard is that subset in any organization of people that resists change, and fights valiantly to beat it back. The aim of the Old Guard is to keep things the way they are, or were, or in some extreme cases, to keep things the way they never were.

Apparently, the name dates back to the early 19th century, when the French Emperor Napoleon was attempting to subdue all of Europe. Napoleon’s elite troops composed his Imperial Guard, and these soldiers he organized as the Young, the Middle, and the Old Guard. The Old Guard was the best of the best. Napoleon hand picked them himself, and kept them close for his own protection and special assignments. It was 1815 when Napoleon finally met defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. One tradition has it that even when the Duke of Wellington and the Prussians had Napoleon’s forces in complete disarray, the Old Guard still mounted one final, futile charge. Another, more likely account of the battle is that the Old Guard protected Napoleon’s retreat, firing back on the advancing forces to preserve a lost cause for as long as possible. At the end of the day, not even the Old Guard could save Napoleon. Napoleon “met his Waterloo,” which is usually the fate of the Old Guard in every generation. Now, if I have just succeeded in offending everyone’s political sensibilities, stay tuned. We’ve only just begun!

In today’s Old Testament reading from the First Book of Samuel (8:4-20, 11:14-15) we meet Samuel himself, a prophet of the Lord and judge over all Israel. Samuel sounds much in the mode of an elite member of the Old Guard. The time was approximately a thousand years before Christ. For decades Samuel had been the leading figure to remind Israel of their identity as a people in covenant relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel, and to call them back to faithfulness whenever they strayed. Israel was not technically a nation at the time of Samuel. They were a confederation of tribes with common roots in the Exodus. They came together in common worship of Yahweh, and in times of emergency. But now Samuel was advancing in years, and it was time to be thinking of who would come next. Samuel’s sons had proved inept and corrupt. So the progressives began to wonder if the old way of organizing themselves could still address the needs of a new day. They wanted a systemic change.

Specifically, instead of a prophet presiding over a loose tribal confederacy, the progressives wanted a king ruling over a nation. The request was more than a matter of orderly succession planning. Palestine was becoming an increasingly populated and complex place. Surrounding peoples had organized themselves into kingdoms, and they were stronger and quicker because of it. Against such foes a tribal confederacy could easily be put down or wiped out altogether. Consolidating themselves around a king was a matter of survival. What is more, if Israel were ever to be a light to enlighten the nations, perhaps first they would have to become a nation themselves.

Samuel didn’t like the idea of a king at all. *The thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us."* Samuel saw the idea of appointing a king as a complete caving in to the corrupt, contemporary culture. Not only would it destroy their identity as a people who

looked only to Yahweh as their king, it would undo all the benefits of the Exodus. The people would be enslaved again as they were in Egypt. In today's reading we hear Samuel's magnificent blast against the inevitable excesses of a big, bloated, bureaucratic government. Who's going to pay for a king? You will. A king, he warns, will tax you into oblivion. He will take your sons and daughters, he will take your crops and herds. He will take, take, take and leave you with nothing.

Samuel makes valid and understandable points. The Old Guard in every generation always does. But I also hear in his words the politics of nostalgia – a longing for the way things used to be, but cannot be ever again. Samuel was caught in the tension between identity and relevance. The dilemma is this: Not every old established tradition is worth conserving. Neither is every progressive idea that floats down from the sky of God. It takes wisdom and discernment to know the difference. In the end Samuel proved himself to be a conservative of the best sort, serving as a bridge – albeit a reluctant bridge – between the old ways and the new, between the tribal confederacy and the monarchy. It's as if he decided that Yahweh might indeed be calling Israel to a new, larger, riskier, more complicated presence and ministry in the region. If so, Samuel was determined to conserve the essence of their identity and pass it on to a new generation.

The struggle between the new and the old might be a helpful window into today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (3:20-35). Mark describes the scene as taking place at the home of Jesus. We don't know what Mark means by use of the word home, whether it was a place Jesus shared with his mother, brothers, and sisters, or a place he shared with his disciples. Nevertheless, everyone seemed to be nearby, including great crowds of people who were eager to be near Jesus. Why? Because Jesus had been curing the sick, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, and making the lame to walk. All good things, one would think. It's progress!

Strangely, these mighty works, these new manifestations of God's power met with opposition from the Old Guard. The scribes who came down from Jerusalem didn't like the new developments at all. They declared that Jesus must be possessed by Beelzebul, and that only by the prince of demons could he be casting out demons. Jesus silenced the scribes with a brilliant rebuttal that he concluded with a warning against falling into the unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Quite simply, it is to name the works of God as evil. If you think that healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead are evil deeds, well, then you are in the mode of rejecting, even attacking any new thing, any good gift God sends down from heaven. You are at cross purposes with God. Make a life orientation of such a mindset and you'll find yourself so deep in the habit that you can't repent and be healed. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable not because God won't forgive, but because the person committing the sin won't repent.

It seems that the Old Guard in Jesus' day consisted of more than the usual roundup of Biblical bad guys. Among the Old Guard were members of Jesus' own family. Today's reading from Mark gives us an intriguing look into the family of Jesus: his mother Mary, his brothers, and his sisters. What comes clear is that the members of Jesus' family were anything but on board with the direction he was taking with his life. In fact they came to pull him out of the crowd, by force if necessary, because people were claiming that Jesus had gone out of his mind. Mary, like Samuel long before her, may have been troubled by nostalgia, yearning for simpler times with Jesus – as if times with Jesus were ever simple. Jesus' brothers and sisters were probably annoyed with this older sibling of theirs and his new found celebrity status. I can almost hear their thoughts. He should ditch the disciples, and return to the family carpentry business. He should get back to normal.

Does God do new things? Was God doing a new thing in and through Jesus? Should Jesus' family have allowed, even encouraged him to pursue the vocation he believed was of

God? Eventually, it seems, they did. Certain members of Jesus' family were able to transcend the constraints of their blood relationship, and trust Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Mary was active and present throughout his ministry, even at the foot of the cross. James, the brother of Jesus, became an early bishop in the church. These two at least were able to make the difficult transition from being members of the Old Guard to being disciples of Jesus. For James it would take nothing short of the resurrection to convince him that God was bringing the great story of Israel to a climax in his earthly brother. James was not a believer until after he met the risen Jesus.

In today's reading from 2nd Corinthians (4:13-5:1), the Apostle Paul declares that the resurrection of Jesus as the key. The resurrection is our greatest hope. It orients us to the future. It allows us to trust in God even though our outer nature is wasting away. Even though everything we see is ultimately temporary, we can trust that God is at work renewing our inner nature every day. Even though every earthly tent we live in passes away, we look forward to a dwelling place with God, eternal in the heavens. Our orientation is forward. Nevertheless, a phrase that I hear frequently these days looks not forward, but backward. The phrase is "back to normal." When can we get back to normal without masks and social distancing? When can we get back to normal, shake hands with people, mingle in crowds without fear, and even receive the wine of the Eucharist? Alas, some say that going back to the normal we knew before the pandemic isn't possible, or even desirable. The world has changed too much to go back. Likewise, Jesus could not go back to Nazareth. Neither could Samuel go back to the old way of governing. But we do not lose heart. With resurrection faith we trust that the future is in God's hands. We trust that our best days are ahead of us, not behind us. Why? Because the God who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also, bring us into his eternal presence, and change us from glory into glory. So our song is not "back to normal," but onward and upward.

A story about the earliest days of human flight is revealing of human nature. The year was 1783, and it was the French who were pioneering the use of hot air balloons. They weren't sure if it was smoke or hot air that gave the balloons lift, so they filled the great paper mache and linen bags with both. Finally, two men were ready to risk a ride into the sky. They set off from the middle of Paris in a crude balloon filled with smoke. Remarkably, they travelled 25 miles into the countryside, where French peasants knew nothing of the experiments with flying balloons. The peasants, looking up and seeing a large contraption belching smoke and descending upon them, took it to be not the next great step for humankind, but an evil thing – a fire breathing monster to be attacked and destroyed. With pitchforks, clubs, and axes they rushed the balloon and shredded it.

Subsequent early balloonists often would receive the same welcome on the ground. They would have to run for their lives while simple, fearful people attacked their balloons. What the balloonists eventually decided to do was carry bottles of champagne with them, and as they would come low over the peasants they would shout, "I bring you champagne! Come, share this champagne with me!" Only then were the peasants able to restrain themselves from attacking the balloons. They learned that these new things descending from the sky actually contained the wine of life.

To me, the story speaks volumes about the life orientation we choose. We can greet the new things God is doing with pitchforks and fear. Or we can greet each new day with resurrection faith. We can sign on as disciples of Jesus, and trust that by the power of his Spirit, we go from strength to strength in the resurrected life of perfect service in God's heavenly kingdom. The kingdom of God is a story that goes on forever, and every chapter is better than the one before.