

What do a people do when they perceive the person responsible for their national life, national security, is mentally ill? What do the people surrounding such a leader do if they don't trust the person at the top to set and keep coherent policies? What do the surrounding nations do if they sense weakness at the highest level of their neighboring country?



Those questions describe the situation

facing the people in our Old Testament lesson today. If you've been following the story of Samuel and Saul and David as it has unfolded in our lessons this summer, you will remember that God allowed the people to crown a king to rule them. At first this worked as the people had hoped: they lived in safety and prosperity—until the power went to King Saul's head and jealousy literally drove him insane.

God had chosen a shepherd boy named David to replace Saul. But this didn't happen immediately. Instead, David served in Saul's court and led troops in battle. David was handsome. Women loved him. David married Saul's daughter and even Saul's son Jonathan loved David best. David was a talented musician, a worship leader. Apparently, God loved David best, also. David was courageous. What couldn't David do better than Saul?

In our lesson today, David FINALLY became king of Israel. But you need to read the parts of David's story our Sunday lessons leave out to understand what happened. Saul had been mortally wounded in battle with the Philistines and committed suicide. His leading General, Abner, made Saul's son Ishbaal King. Abner apparently didn't consult God, even though he knew that God had chosen David.

Names are very important, especially in these very ancient stories. The name Ishbaal, or Ish-Baal, means "Man of Baal," the pagan fertility God, or maybe just "Master." You can tell from his name, though, that he is NOT God's choice because he chose another God.

But Ishbaal became king. He ruled over the northern tribes of Israel, the southern tribe of Benjamin (Saul's people), Samaria, and the foreign lands in between that Saul had won in battle. David became king of Judah, his own southern tribe. Ishbaal ruled two years during a civil war of succession that David eventually won after the General, Abner, defected to David's camp.

David let Abner retire, but one of his generals killed Abner for revenge. Then two of Ishbaal's military captains killed HIM as a show of their support for David. David's insistence of a state funeral for his enemies Ishbaal and Abner won the respect of many of the warring factions.

So, after this history lesson, here we are at today's first reading. David is FINALLY crowned King of all Israel. Just as the Lord had chosen while David had been a mere child—no instant gratification here! Why did everyone take so long to carry out God's will? And in the meanwhile, did the people grow impatient? Take one side or another? Stop listening to each other?

In a word: they were seeking power. Power can blind us to God if we let ourselves get focused on acquiring power. And wanting our own way for our personal gain can blind us to the desires of God.

In today's reading we learn that David was 30 years old when he became King of his Tribe of Judah and it took 7.5 years before he was crowned King of "all Israel." In that time David had united the tribes in a way they hadn't been together since their wilderness journey.

While David was king of only Judah, his capitol had been in a town called Hebron. Then he captured a small stronghold from the Jebusites, the people who Joshua had left intact when the people originally settled the Promised Land, even though God had told him to not let the Jebusites live. The small stronghold was called Jerusalem and, as a sign of unity for the united tribes, David made Jerusalem his new capitol.

Our Psalm today extols the holy city of Zion, as Jerusalem has come to be known. The people of Israel found Jerusalem to not just be a physical stronghold, but the very "seat" of God here on Earth.

Over time, the people associated the physical place—Jerusalem—and eventually the Temple that David's son Solomon built there, to be invincible. They believed that Zion would be theirs forever, that Jerusalem could not be taken from them. Hadn't God made covenant with them? Hadn't God given them Jerusalem? Weren't THEY God's people?

It had been a while since I had read the portions of King David's story not included in our Sunday lessons. I had only remembered the child-approved version, the Sunday School version of David's story which has been cleaned of all the messy HUMAN parts: the power=grabbing, the conniving, the double-dealing, around the turnover of power between Saul's reign and David's. And I hadn't realized just how many years passed between Samuel anointing David to serve as King and David actually becoming King.

What surprised me the most, though, was the realization that the people knew God's will—that David become King—and yet some of them worked to put Saul's son on the throne instead of David.

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So, here's the meaning that we can glean from this lesson about our situation today:

- Do what God commands when he commands it, even if we think we know better. Joshua should have obeyed God about the Jebusites. Instead, David had to deal with them and the consequences of Joshua not doing what God told him.
- If we delay in implementing God's will, as Saul and Abner and Ishbaal did, the consequences might prove fatal.
- Treat your enemies with utmost respect, as David did. This is one of the ways David unified the people.
- And what about the idea of associating God with a particular place, a particular city or Temple or Church? At best, that merely says "We have historically made ourselves ready to meet God here." But God isn't confined to one place, or one time, or one building, or one people. God isn't even confined to one Kingdom or Nation or even one political party.
- God is the God of all. God is at work in our world. If the fruits of God's Spirit are not prevailing in our world, we should ask ourselves how we are helping, or hindering, God's will from being done. Have we prayed for those we despise? Have we listened with closed mouth and open mind to those with whom we disagree? Have we turned our future over to the Lord?