

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [116th Anniversary]
June 6, 2021
Rev. YoungMin Kim

The Path Taken, The Path to Go
1 Samuel 8:4-7

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Today is our church's 116th anniversary. I'd love to have our annual Tent Service and share food with you to celebrate our anniversary. However, even though our situation has made a turn for the better and we became free from masks, it is too early to have the Tent Service with food. I hope next year will be much better than this year, so we can have our 117th anniversary in the backyard with delicious food.

Celebrating our church's anniversary, let me carry out a simple survey on the spot. I will give you a second. Please think how long it has been since you joined Nokesville UMC. And then, I will call year ranges. So, if you are in the year range I call, please stand, and we will recognize you. For online worshipers, please leave your names and years you have joined with us as a reply, and I will share it with those who are here in person. Okay, let me start with less than one Year. If you have joined with us in the past year, please stand. (applause) Next, between one year and ten years. Please stand if you have joined with us more than one year and up to ten years. (applause) How about between eleven years and twenty years? Please stand if you have joined with us more than eleven years and up to twenty years. (applause) How about between twenty-one years and thirty years? Please stand if you have joined with us more than twenty years and up to thirty years. (applause) How about between thirty-one years and forty years? Please stand if you have joined with us more than thirty-one years and up to forty years. (applause) How about forty-one years or more? Please stand! (applause). You are truly the history of Nokesville UMC.

No matter how long you have been with us at Nokesville UMC, you are all part of Nokesville UMC who remember our past, live the present, and pass on the future. My family and I are also glad and honored to be part of Nokesville history and making history together in 2021.

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According to the Lectionary schedule, we read 1 Samuel 8:4-7. Let us go back to the Old Testament story. After Moses and Joshua, who were the leaders of the Israelites in the wilderness and in the land of Canaan, died, the Israelites in the Promised Land became influenced by alien cultures and religions, became disobedient to God, and sinned against God. For the disobedient people, God sent judges and wanted His people to return to God through those judges. All the stories of the judges are in the Book of Judges, the seventh book in the Old Testament. According to the Book of Judges, numerous judges appear: Othniel—the first judge, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah—the female judge, Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. And then, in the Book of First Samuel, two judges appear: Eli, and Samuel—the last judge in the Bible. Today, we will focus on Samuel, who ended the period of theocracy and opened the period of monarchy in Israel.

When Samuel became a judge, succeeding Judge Eli, Israel was in a state of confusion. The Ark of God, representing the presence of God, was captured by the Philistines, the most powerful enemy nation of Israel. The Israelites might have felt that God left them. What was worse, the Israelites worshiped Baal and other foreign gods at the time. The first work after Samuel became a judge was to gather all the Israelites and said, "if you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 7:3). Responding to his plea, the Israelites put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served God only. After that, Samuel listened to and followed God's orders and led the Israelites in God's way. Up to this point, there seemed no problem, and there seemed no need of kings in Israel. But things changed.

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Now, Samuel became old. And he appointed his two sons as judges. Their names were Joel and Abijah. According to the Mosaic laws, judges should render righteous decisions for the people and should not distort justice, show partiality, or accept bribes (Deuteronomy 16:18-19). However, Samuel's two sons were not like his father. They turned aside after gain, took bribes, and perverted justice for their own advantage.

As a result, all the elders of Israel gathered, came to old Samuel, and said, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations" (1 Samuel 8:5). For the elders, there were some reasons to ask so: first, they did not have righteous and faithful judges like Samuel any longer; and second, other nations, especially the Philistines, had their own kings, and their nations became more powerful than before. Thus, the elders made the conclusion, "We need a king." The elders must have not known the aftermath of their request. Nay, Joel and Abijah must have not known the aftermath of their behavior as judges.

God responded to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (v. 7). The elders and Israelites needed a human king, not God the King. As a result, the kingdom of Israel was established, and great kings like David and Solomon ruled over Israel; but David had to endure betrayal by his son Absalom, face life-threatening situations, and kill his son. King David had shed too much blood. How about Solomon? He established the Temple of Jerusalem and brought Israel's prosperity and military power, but he also brought the division of Israel—the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. And their dependents had continued hostility and killings, and finally both kingdoms were collapsed.

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Next Friday and Saturday, we will have the Annual Conference. In the conference, the most painful and heartbreaking moment for me is a time to report of closing churches of the year. Every district superintendent comes to the front and reports the closing and merging churches in each district. Whenever I see the names and pictures of the churches, I say to myself, "The churches once had a heyday. Their sanctuaries were once filled by church members and children..." This conference passing through the pandemic, we might have more closing or merging churches this year with membership and financial issues. I hope I am wrong.

Since Nokesville UMC was founded in 1905, our church has passed through World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War, Oil Shock, the Dot-Com Bubble, the Subprime Mortgage Crisis, and pandemics including the Spanish Flu, Influenza, the Hong Kong Flu, and COVID-19. We have overcome all crises and protected and preserved our church by God's grace and mercy. Yes, we deserve to celebrate our church's 116th anniversary. I know that pieces of cake are too small to celebrate it, but they are ready in the Narthex. Please enjoy them with proper social distancing and have fellowship with each other after worship. On the other hand, we also need to have a heavy responsibility. Just like our faith ancestors in Nokesville UMC protected and preserved our church and handed it over to us, so we should protect and preserve our church and hand it over to our faith descendants.

Samuel led Israel by listening to and following God's orders, so we need to follow in Samuel's ways to preserve our church 116 more years. I do not deny that we need our knowledge, experience, and wisdom to serve our church members and maintain our church. But we should know that nothing can be prioritized except for God's will and God's way. How can we know God's will and way? We all unite with one heart and one mind and purse our communal goodness for the glory of God, not personal advantages like Samuel's two sons. As long as we pour out all our efforts to serve and love our God and our neighbors, we will keep making our history.

So, I as your pastor want to ask you. Please return to In-Person Worship. If you are not vaccinated yet or if you feel uncomfortable for In-Person Worship, it is okay to join Online Worship. But once you are ready, please come back to the sanctuary and fill your spot. With hope and passion in the new normal, let us together do our mission once again. It cannot be done by myself. It cannot be done by our church leaders. It can be done by us, together. Amen.