Today, (surprise, surprise), we are going to talk about God. I'll begin by reading a quote from the contemporary Benedictine mystic David Steindl-Rast from his lovely devotional *99 Names of God*:

"The word God stems from human history's most consequential discovery. It is…the insight … that we stand in a personal relationship with the unfathomable mystery of life…And that we may call to that mystery, because it calls to us. This word "call to" with its meaning of invocation, marks the… root of the word God. It is not a name but rather a reference to our relationship with the nameless; it is not a term for some creature, but rather points to the origin by which all creatures originally sprang from nonbeing into being. In short, it is a word with the momentous task of pointing to the mystery.

"Mystery, in this absolute sense, is not a vague term. It means that deepest reality which we can never take hold of, but may understand if we let it take hold of us."

In one of the first papers I wrote in seminary, when I was absolutely new to theology, (and rather too full of myself), I was asked was to explore the nature of God as revealed in "The Song of Moses," which appears in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 15. In case you don't remember it, here's how it begins:

'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

And here are the images I drew from that song: God is savior, strength, might, warrior, power, holiness, wind-wielding, terrifying, protective, the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea, majestic, wonder worker, leading to this stirring conclusion:

'You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
the place, O Lord, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.'

My conclusion? The ultimate act of God was to lead me to a safe place.

On the day our professor handed our papers back, he summarized them as a group, praising our understanding and eloquence, and then he stopped. A pregnant pause. "The only problem," he said, "was that none of you wrote about the entire text. You all left out its last line."

We looked at him and each other. “What last line?” we wondered. “We included it: the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.”

“Indeed you did. But it is not the last line.”

Again, we turned our astonished heads.

“The last line may be the most important one of all. The one that sums up all the others. ‘The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.’”

We still didn’t get it.

“But–all that is implied in the rest,” one of us ventured.

“But it is not directly stated. This line says that God is not only their savior, but their king. God is a force to be obeyed.”

This was totally beyond me. Most people I knew didn’t even believe in God, much less consider God a force to be obeyed. If God were really all that, why were we in the mess we were in? Sure, the Israelites saw God part the waters so that they might cross the sea, but how do you see God on an ordinary Monday when your computer is acting up? Or when your boss is being a beast?

Furthermore, the idea of God as a king did not sit lightly in the minds or on the shoulders of our little group of progressive Christians studying in Berkeley, California. The Kingdom of God was almost unanimously rejected as inappropriate to a democracy. We talked about the “Realm of God,” or the “Reign of God,” even the “Kin-dom of God.” But not the Kingdom.

Unfortunately, all these substitutions are as problematic as the original. Because authority itself is problematic. Deciding how we are going to organize ourselves, and to what purpose, may be our species’ biggest dilemma, not just in our own time, but in all time. When

Jesus tried to teach about the Kingdom of God, people thought he was possessed by a crazy spirit and told him to go home to his mother.

Meanwhile, the same professor who had us write about Exodus 15 later informed us that the passage we read this morning, 1 Samuel 8, is essential if we are ever to understand the true nature of God. God lets us do whatever we want, but if we reject God's authority, we risk losing everything.

This was also very hard for us seminarians to see. By the mid 1990's when we were there, God was more about consolation than kingship, come to show us the way of right-action, so that we might overturn the world's systemic ills. Jesus was a force for social justice, or, occasionally, a powerful shaman, as one famous guest lecturer arrived to tell us. He wasn't a king. He was here to help us to realize the just world we wanted.

Or as the Israelites told Samuel, "We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

It is human nature to see society as the means of providing what we want. One reason JFK's Inaugural address "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" was so memorable was that most of us view government as an instrument of provision and security. We argue when it asks something in return.

The Church, too, is often seen as a provider of services. But Eucharistic Prayer C clearly reminds us: "Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal." This is a perfect critique of my seminarian view of God.

Back to the Biblical insistance that God is king. Again the warning. If we turn away from God and believe in our own power, the result is a guaranteed disaster.

How can we be ruled by someone we can't even see? How can we give of ourselves if we don't know what we are giving to?

One of the answers lies in the word "believe." Another lies in the highly urban and technological world that we have created to serve our needs.

McGill University professor (now emeritus) Charles Taylor begins his magisterial study of modernity, *A Secular Age,* with the following question: "Why was it impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"

The word that comes into English as "I believe in" is the Greek word for "trust." In English, "believe in" and "trust" are very different verbs. "Believe in" is a conceptual, intellectual decision. "Trust" is much dicier. From an early age, we are all taught that it is very important what and whom we trust, because if we trust in the wrong person, we risk being deeply, if not irrevocably hurt. "Believing in" is grasping. "Trust" is letting go. People in 1500 might have believed in God, but they did not always trust him. Most of them were too busy conquering the world or being conquered. Indeed, believing themselves to be Almighty God's viceroys on earth, they took all the warlike aspects of God upon themselves, conveniently, like my seminary class, forgetting that those were attributes appropriate to God, not them.

Again, it is our very human nature; indeed, it is an attribute of the conscious mind, to see both what is and what is not. To see what is lacking is to awaken desire. We are creatures who want things. We are dissatisfied all the time. The Bible alludes to this; Buddhism names it

outright as the cause of all suffering. To make a very complex point in few words, when we obey God as king, we are literally trusting God to provide what we want rather than us taking it upon ourselves.

I'm going to stop here. The long season ahead of us gives us ample time to explore the themes of human desire and trusting God and will give us many rich images to pray with. Indeed, it may be the main reason the Church exists: to be a school of love where we learn how to let go of our fears and insecurities and see what wonders arise when we encounter "that deepest reality which we can never take hold of, but may understand if we let it take hold of us."

We cannot do this alone. Thank you for being here. Amen.