

“From Judges to Kings: Samuel, Saul & David”

1 Samuel 15:34-35; 16:1-13

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This morning we continue our survey of the Old Testament, and we move from Ruth to the very next book in the Bible called 1st Samuel. As I mentioned last week, when the Hebrew people finally make it to the Promised Land, they are governed by warrior-rulers called judges. While the judges were often effective in conquering the Israelites' foes, they were not great leaders and so things slowly fell apart. Instead of following the 10 Commandments, everyone decided to go their own way. The Book of Judges ends with the verse, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21.25).

“In those days there was no king in Israel, and things got really bad....” The foreshadowing here is not too subtle, is it?? Perhaps if Israel was ruled by a king then things might be different, right? A king with authority might be able to both protect the people as well as set an example for all to follow. Last week we heard the story of Ruth - the foreigner and widower who sticks close to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth is willing to leave behind her home and go to a new land with Naomi who also has lost her husband. This remarkably brave woman marries an Israelite named Boaz. And God blesses Ruth and Boaz with a son named Obed who becomes the father of Jesse, the grandfather of David - the one who will become king.

But before we get to David's story, just a little more background is needed. The book of 1 Samuel begins with the prophet Samuel, and how God uses him to select the first king of Israel named Saul. From the beginning, Samuel is not thrilled about the idea of having a king, and to be honest, neither is God! Up to this point in the life of Israel, God alone was to be worshiped as the Sovereign Ruler. And as the 10 Commandments remind us, there should be nothing to take our allegiance from the one true God. Perhaps Samuel knew that there was danger in people putting too much of their loyalty in a human. But when the people insist on being ruled by a king, so that they may be “like the other nations” (1 Sam 8.19-20) God tells Samuel to listen to the voice of the people. The first king that is chosen by God is Saul. Though Saul stood head and shoulders above everyone else (1 Sam 9.2) it only takes a few chapters before Saul gets into trouble. For some reason Saul disobeys God's order to eliminate all of the Amelikes, and instead Saul keeps the king and the best animals alive (1 Sam 15.1-9). God is not pleased with Saul because of his disobedience, and through the prophet Samuel Saul is delivered the news that he has been rejected as king.

We pick up the story at the very end of the 15th chapter of 1 Samuel...

**1 Samuel 15:34-35; 16:1-13**

Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from

being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.”

Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do, and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.”

Samuel did what the LORD commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?” He said, “Peaceably. I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And Samuel sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, Samuel looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely his anointed is now before the LORD.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him, for we will not sit down until he comes here.” He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome.

The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him, for this is the one.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Can you remember what it was like when you were back in elementary school? For some of you here it might not be hard, but for most of us it's been a while! Some of my first memories of being at school revolve around the time spent during recess - the fun we had chasing each other, sliding down the big slide, swinging on the swings - on the days it rained we stayed inside and played games or watched a movie on an old fashioned film strip. When I was in the 3rd or 4th grade the favorite thing to do at recess was to play kickball. While I enjoyed the game, kicking and running around the bases, kickball was my first introduction to the not-so-fun part of competitive sports - the part when you picked captains who were usually the most popular kids in the class, and the captains took turns picking teams. You probably remember how it goes. The kids who are the most athletic or popular get picked first, and those who are considered less than desirable to be on the team are picked last. While I think I may have been picked somewhere in the middle of the pack, I do remember the names and faces of my classmates who got picked last. Sometimes they would just walk off by themselves, telling the rest of us they really didn't want to play after all. But deep down we knew better.

How teams are picked at recess illustrates well how our world chooses who's in and who's out, who's a winner and who's not. And as we know, this dynamic does not operate only in elementary school but continues throughout our lives. Those who are seen as being more valuable are the ones who have certain outward, physical traits - maybe they are taller, more attractive, they are wearing the right clothes- something about their appearance conveys that they are the winners, as compared to others who are less valued.

***Today's story of David being selected as the next king of Israel illustrates a theme that runs throughout the Bible - that the way God operates is very different than the world does. God sees us in a different way than the world does.*** When Eliab, the first of Jesse's sons steps forward, Samuel thinks to himself, "Surely this is the one whom God will choose!" We learn in the next chapter that Eliab is the oldest son, the one who appears to be the likely candidate. But God speaks clearly to Samuel: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16.7). As Jesse brings out one son after the other, Samuel speaks the same message again and again. "No, the Lord has not chosen this one." When all seven have been dismissed, Samuel desperately asks the only question he can think of: "Do you have any other children?" Then Jesse says, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." There's one who is too young to even be considered to be on the ballot! There's one who has drawn the short stick - he's out in the field doing the lowly but necessary work of tending the sheep. The older brothers probably put in their time as keepers of the sheep - now it's their little brother's turn. But Samuel knows the election will not be over until all the candidates are considered, even the one who has been left off the ballot! So Samuel says to Jesse, "Send and bring him, for we will not sit down until he comes here." And when David comes, the Lord tells Samuel that David is the one. In the presence of his whole family David is anointed with oil, and we are told that "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward."

It will be some time before David becomes officially the king, and the following chapters in 1 Samuel tell the drama of Saul declining and David rising in the eyes of everyone. As you might expect, this was not easy for David's brothers to accept. In the very next chapter we are told the story of David and Goliath - how the giant Philistine threatened the people and how he struck fear in everyone's hearts. And again it is little David, the one who is off tending the sheep, the one whom his father sends to bring his brothers food while they are on the frontlines fighting the Philistines - David is the one who becomes the unlikely hero and slays the giant with a rock and a slingshot. God surely is with David, and despite the resentment of his brothers and jealousy from Saul, David will become the greatest king Israel will ever have. Though he is God's anointed, David will make serious mistakes - his sins cannot be ignored. But it will be through this unlikely youngest son, from the village of Bethlehem, from a family that has no obvious pedigree, that Jesus the Messiah will come.

Reflecting on this passage, Bible scholar Bruce Birch says this: ***"One of the most basic themes of the entire biblical message is that God finds possibilities for grace in the most unexpected places and through the most unlikely persons"*** (Birch, [New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II](#), p. 1099). We have seen this theme play out in some of the stories we have covered this fall. Think of Sarah and Abraham, chosen to be parents of a great nation in their old age. Though once barren, God is able to use them as vessels of God's grace. Instead of Esau, God chooses the younger son Jacob to be the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. And it is a foreigner named Ruth who becomes the great-grandmother of David, and she is included in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's gospel. Jesus is born to parents who are young and homeless - Jesus spends his life as a no-name carpenter until

God's Spirit comes upon him and he starts his ministry out in the countryside of Galilee. Jesus doesn't select his disciples like he's trying to stack a team of winners! Instead, his followers include lowly fisherman and tax collectors who were looked down upon for their shady business practices. Jesus never married but shared many conversations and meals with women who were some of his closest allies, and the women were the ones who stuck with him all the way to the empty tomb. And the person chosen by God to be the herald of the good news is none other than the Pharisee named Saul, a fierce persecutor of the early Christians - an unlikely choice to become the great apostle Paul who turned the world upside down for the gospel. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor 1.20)" The tendency of God to use the unlikelyest of people in the unlikelyest of ways is a big part of God's wisdom. ***But it's one thing to just hear these stories in the Bible about God using unlikely people, and it's another to see what all of this means for our lives.*** Before closing this morning, I want to invite you to consider how this story of God choosing young David may speak to us today.

First, a word of encouragement. Churches today are struggling to gain members, participation is down in most denominations, and the influence of the church in the broader society is in decline. We can see these trends in the life of our congregation, too. Studies have been done in recent years trying to explain all of this, and the consensus is that we are entering into a world where things are much different than they were 50 years ago. ***While some may grieve for a return to the ways things used to be, and others may opt to stay in denial, I believe the Holy Spirit is inviting us into a new future God is creating.*** "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isaiah 43.18-19). In a world that judges success by appearances and other standards, it's good to remember that God looks at the heart. This Thursday afternoon a group of you gathered to knit things to be donated to members in our community, and I was reminded that God works through the faithfulness of small groups doing big things. In a world that is preoccupied with size and appearance and institutional success, we need to hold onto the promise that God is able to work in big ways through unlikely people like you and me!

My final invitation this morning has to do with our own lives, our own hearts. The late theologian and spiritual guide Henri Nouwen spoke a lot about turning towards those things in our lives that we may be ashamed of - our anxiety, our grief, our failures - the brokenness we are so good at hiding from each other. But instead of turning away from these things, Nouwen encourages us to turn towards them - to embrace our brokenness, to befriend it. ***Such a move to turn towards the unlikely places in our own hearts is an act of faith, an act of trust.*** In a world that tells us the opposite, we are called to trust in a God who is able to use the unlikelyest of things to bring new life into the world. Can strength come from weakness? New life from an empty tomb? The story of God picking as king one who is not even on the ballot, the one who is off somewhere in the field - this story can be ours when we offer our whole selves to God in prayer. Not just the attractive parts, but our whole selves. And who knows? God may be able to accomplish through us abundantly more than we can ever imagine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.