

## **1 Samuel 16:1-13**

David's anointing in today's story follows a traditional biblical storyline in which God shows unexpected favour for a younger sibling, singling out an unlikely candidate.

On the surface this may seem a sweet story affirming the value of "the least of these". At least, that is the way it has often been read. But we should not minimize the conflicts into which young David is thrust by God's choice and Samuel's actions. As the story shows, God's call to individuals can appear straightforward and even optimistic in the beginning, but can develop in unexpected and even tragic ways over the course of a lifetime.

The passage looks backward to what has already happened: The failures of the judges and the encroaching Philistines set the conditions for the installation of a monarchy over the tribes of Israel. So when the people of Israel ask for a king, Samuel anoints Saul, who appears at first to exhibit some leadership qualities. As the first king over the nation, Saul perfectly fits the prototypical characteristics of an ancient Near Eastern ruler. He was a military leader, and enjoyed wide populist support.

The passage emphasizes the physical characteristics of Saul: tall, majestic, strong, and handsome, characteristics much in line with the general understanding of ancient Near Eastern kingship as displayed in visual examples such as Naram-Sin and Rameses II. Most significantly, before his rise, Saul was humble in spirit, despite

his characteristically tall and physically attractive traits.

But Saul's humility soon gives way to disobedience, and he consequently loses favour with God. Almost immediately, his authority is undermined by a string of clashes with both Samuel and God. Saul's exact offence is unclear. Latitude for decisions and grace for mistakes are not given to Saul as he is decisively rejected by God. His downward slide continues until his death at the end of 1 Samuel. Kings do not have term limits in the ancient world, and Samuel is despondent over the presence of the continued reign of Saul and the fate of Israel under this reign.

So, God speaks to Samuel and tells him that God's favour is withdrawn from Saul. Previously, Samuel had rejected Saul's confession of sin and his pleading to be restored. Now, God is sending Samuel to anoint another king.

It is easy to condemn Saul and move on to David. Yet, the Saul situation remains unresolved. It is not tidy, and we are reminded that essentially, the world is not a tidy place. Stories do not end the way we wish, and falls from leadership are often ragged and painful. God and Samuel and Saul all look bad here. We serve a God who is present in the jagged endings in our lives, making God sometimes seem different than we expect. God cannot repair everything that we have broken.

One of the primary messages of this story is that God is (yet again) providing for the welfare of the people, just as God had previously provided deliverance from Pharaoh; manna, water, and the law in the wilderness; a land during the settlement;

and guidance and leadership during the period of the judges. At the start of the passage, God says to Samuel: "Find a man named Jesse who lives there, for I have selected one of his sons to be my king." The Hebrew word that is translated here as "selected" means "to see" as in English, Hebrew uses "to see"— "I have seen to it." This Hebrew term provides the key to this story. It signals that God has "seen" the people's need even before they are aware of it. As God had done in the past, God was again venturing out ahead of the people, authoring the scroll of their story before it had yet been unrolled.

God's guidance is usually not as discernable in the moment as it is in hindsight. We may not sense what God is doing in our midst or how God is leading us. Even the great prophet Samuel did not know what God was doing. This story, with so much of the Old Testament, affirms that God's "providence" operates beyond the spectrum in which our sight operates, but even so we remain within God's view. Note also that God's eye here is on the flock and not just the individual sparrow. In our age we tend to individualize so many of the messages of the Bible. Here, it is important to note that it is the community of faith that is under God's care. Neither Saul nor David's older brothers might have understood the way in which God was providing for Israel as a good way, but God's eyes were on the people as a whole and not merely the individuals.

Samuel is still grieving Saul's failure as king, but God is ready to move on and has located the next king in Bethlehem among Jesse's sons. But Samuel is not only sad, he's worried: a rival to the throne will certainly cause political problems and so

God provides him with a clever cover-story to get him safely to Bethlehem. Samuel isn't the only one that's concerned: the city elders shake with fear when this prophet shows up at their door.

The level of fear in the nation is heightened under the state of war, exemplified by the trembling city elders who instantly interrogate Samuel about his intentions. God instructs Samuel to invite Jesse's family to a sacrificial meal, without telling Jesse anything about the reasons for the meal.

Samuel declares a sacrifice to God, an interaction that is turned upside down. The people of the town are supposed to offer hospitality to the stranger. Yet it is this stranger, the one who had never visited Bethlehem before, who is inviting the town to worship. After fears subside for all parties, Samuel begins his search for the new king based on the same expectations he had with his previous anointing. After all, Saul's physical stature was one of the distinctive attributes of the handsome first king who "stood head and shoulders above everyone else".

The unexpected twists and turns continue as God instructs Samuel to unlearn his previous expectations. While Samuel looks for a king based on the model of physical stature and poise, God instructs him to suspend human logic and trust in Divine guidance.

Jesse brought each of his first seven sons before Samuel to see which son would be anointed as king. When the eldest son Eliab, who was tall and fair, passed before Samuel, the prophet thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the

Lord."

God's response has echoed down through the ages: "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Jesse then paraded Abinadab and Shammah in front of Samuel, but each time God said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse brought four more sons forward, but none of them were chosen either.

As each successive son passes before Samuel, one could imagine the prophet's disappointment. He turns to Jesse, perhaps in bewilderment, and asks whether all of his sons were present. There was one more son, but he was the youngest and of such little account that Jesse had left him out in the field tending the sheep. Reluctantly, Jesse answers, "There is still the youngest, but he's out in the fields watching the sheep and goats." It appears that the inspection of Samuel is now following the heart of God. He does not see with human eyes, but in congruence with God, he is looking at the heart.

God's choice of the youngest son is theologically significant. In addition to being another of the "reversals" introduced in Hannah's song which we heard last week, this counterintuitive move is an Old Testament staple. Seth over Cain (who had murdered Abel), Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Ephraim over Manasseh, Moses over Aaron, and Solomon over Adonijah, are just a few of the most important instances of younger sons whom God chooses to use over older brothers. When this

is coupled with the insight that God uses what is weak, and whose power is made perfect in weakness, the connections to Jesus, "the anointed one", become clear.

At the request of Samuel, the youngest finally comes. When Jesse presents his youngest son, who, still a "boy", was naturally small in stature. Samuel realizes that this youngest son, David, is the one anointed by God. Samuel responds obediently to God's voice, ceremoniously anointing David's head with oil in front of some rather perplexed brothers. "And the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David from that day on." Most kings are anointed as they ascend to the throne, not years before. So why put a boy in danger by making him into a rival, except perhaps to suggest to readers that, through all the tangled episodes that follow, God's thumb is on the scale in his favour?

In the ancient Near East, the shepherd was a symbol of the king. Ancient audiences would have been touched by the irony that the one who was thought too insignificant to be considered for the role of king was actually already fulfilling his future vocation: shepherding the flock. God has been consistent to choose the one the world does not. The lesson here is the same as we see in the biblical texts over and over. The world has a pecking order: elder son over youngest, Pharaohs over slaves, the sons of priests over an outsider. God pays no attention to that order. A second lesson is that the people God calls are not easy to find. God and Samuel travel to an out-of-the-way village. David is away, sitting with the sheep. God had to search for David, just as God had to search for the slaves in Egypt. God does not pick the most notable or available and that is also a lesson for us.

It is probably human nature to reduce our large world to our country, city, or even our own neighbourhood. We can become so entrenched in our place that we forget about others. We need to be open to a call that includes people from the places we can barely name. We are not the centre of God's universe.

Now both Saul and Jesse's oldest are rejected. Both are rejected as a candidate for kingship but are not removed from God's favour. Any call is God's alone and rejection from one position does not disqualify one from other pursuits in the kingdom. This brief narrative drama – beautiful in its use of irony, suspense, and reversal of expectations – plays upon the contrast between seeing and hearing. The problem is that Samuel is relying on his human sense of vision, which will not do for the work of God. Samuel's job was not so much to see as to listen: "You shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." The message is rather clear. When dealing with matters of God's actions and will, human sight is an inadequate tool. The human sense of hearing – if we are listening to God – is preferable.

This dimension of the passage rings out loudly in our cultural context. We rely on our sight for almost everything, but it often proves untrustworthy. Advertisers know that the quickest way to get their fingers into our wallets is through our eyes – by bombarding us with images of sexuality and excess. Do we really think that wearing the same perfume, lipstick, or jeans as the gorgeous model in a commercial will make us more attractive and successful? Apparently, since we buy the products ... and the cars, hamburgers, and light beer.

We also tend to pick our leaders – politicians, coaches, celebrities, and so on – based on our society's norms about appearance. For the last century or more, the taller of the two final American presidential candidates has almost always won. What a powerful, counter-cultural message that this passage has to offer us and our times! "The Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Samuel secretly anoints David as God's chosen future king while Saul is still reigning. And for the next fifteen chapters, that is, most of the story, the conflict between the two kings Samuel has anointed, a conflict neither of them created, balloons from rivalry and jealousy to deadly hostility: the recognized king of Israel, who still had a following, periodically determines to destroy his hidden heir, who time after time eludes his grasp. Saul's dynasty is doomed and his reign blighted as he seesaws back and forth between rigidity and humility, between savagery and nobility, losing ground not only in God's eyes but in those of his family and readers.

At the same time as Saul's story lurches to its tragic end, David's story unfolds with what seems at first to be naïve zeal, and soon becomes mixed with crafty and even morally objectionable behaviours. Unlike Saul, David is gifted with favour by nearly all who meet him, including Saul's own family members. He is pressed into Saul's service, living at the palace, and even when forced to flee he escapes with several hundred supporters.

Biblical narrative rarely reveals the inner thoughts of characters, so when

looking at this story from the perspective of Samuel, we are left with many questions. How does the prophet face the disappointments of his career? Even after he successfully led the Israelites against the Philistines, the people came to ask him for a king, adding that his sons, who had been appointed judges, were as corrupt as Eli's sons as we read last week. After God reassures Samuel that the Israelites' rejection is a rejection of God, Samuel anoints Saul as king over Israel, only to have his protégé fail at almost every turn.

Yet, in spite of Samuel's grief and failings, the prophet remains open to God's word and to new possibilities. While this may not provide a comforting "central Bible truth", it does offer a realistic picture of the human condition and of the ways in which we might deal with disappointment. While we may often feel the grief, remorse, and guilt of past failings – real or imagined – God does not condemn us for them. Rather, God does provide God's servants with guidance and new possibilities even when we may not see them.

God's call does not mean that we as humans are perfected. We can and will sin, sometimes in gigantic ways. Without God's forgiveness and restoration, our call from God and even our very lives are doomed. The way 1 Samuel speaks of David is designed to teach us just that lesson.

When we give our heart to God he can cleanse us, save us, and strengthen us. The heart is where God does God's best work. Whatever troubles your heart, come to God. A well-known theologian wrote, "Don't ever hesitate to take to [God] whatever

is on your heart. He already knows it anyway, but He doesn't want you to bear its pain or celebrate its joy alone.”

Amen.